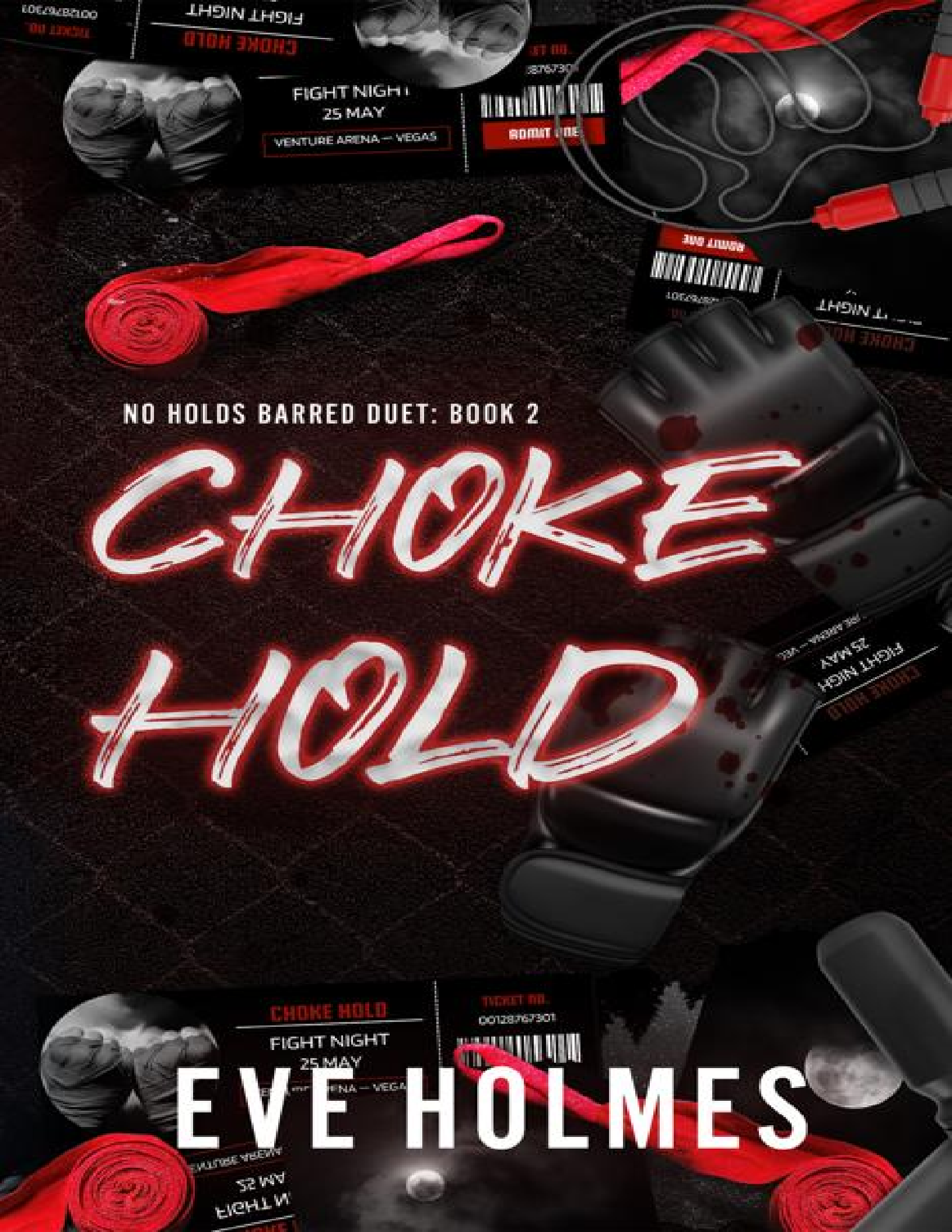
NO HOLDS BARRED DUET: BOOK 2
CHOKE HOLD
CHOKE HOLD
FIGHT NIGHT
25 MAY
VENTURE ARENA — VEGAS
TICKET NO.
00128767301
EVE HOLMES

Choke Hold

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CHOKE HOLD

NO HOLDS BARRED
BOOK 2

EVE HOLMES

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For those fighting against something that's trying to hold you back.

Drop kick that motherfucker.

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Thank you
Glossary
Also by Eve Holmes
About the Author

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

Choke Hold is book 2 in the No Holds Barred duet, and is a continuation of Ty and Luca's story. Therefore, you must have read book 1, Hooks In, prior to beginning this one. As this is the final book in their story, we will be ending with an HEA!

Ty and Luca are bringing even more fights, steam, and cinnamon rolls in this next installment. Their story is one of growth and resilience in their journey to the top, as they move past their need to fight each other… kind of…

MMA continues to play a large role in this story, and a glossary of MMA terms used are located in the back of the book. But just as with book 1, a thorough understanding of these terms is not necessary to enjoy the story.

There is some content in this book that may be unsettling to some, so please review the following content warnings:

- Blood and fighting within the sport of MMA
- Mention of past drug use
- Homophobic slurs (not from any main or prominent side characters)
- Explicit sex scenes

Thank you for continuing with Ty and Luca's story!

Eve xo

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ONE

"DEEPER, TY."

"Fuck off."

"Come on, get that ass into it."

"If you don't shut your mouth, I'll shut it for you."

"By shoving something in it? That sounds fun."

Ty closes his eyes with a sigh, and I smile.

We have the best time together.

He finishes his last squat and places the bar on the rack, before he grabs a towel and leaves the weight room.

I chuckle, grabbing my own towel and following him.

"What, you *don't* want to shove your dick in my mouth? That's surprising." I stop beside him as he stands at the edge of the mats in the gym. But his eyes are on the boxing ring, where Rosa and Noah are sparring.

He shakes his head slightly. "A fist to your mouth sounds much better right about now."

I smile and turn towards the ring as well. "Save that for tomorrow. The cock sucking will be good foreplay."

Ty remains silent, so I turn my head to him again as he intently watches Rosa and Noah, laser-focused with hands fidgeting at his sides.

I nudge him with my elbow. "Ready?"

His focus finally breaks as he brings his gaze to me. "Very fucking ready."

And now I can't help but give him a genuine smile. A month away from contact training has been hard on him while he healed from his concussion. And now that he has the all clear to train with no restrictions starting tomorrow, the anticipation in him is palpable.

"It'll be nice to see you in the ring again," Max says from the mat where he is watching Seb and Elijah roll. He smiles at Ty. "You have some work to do."

"More like some catching up to do." I nudge Ty again and he side steps away from me with an eye roll. "Don't worry though, I kept up *my* training while you were on your brain break and I'll get you back in tip-top fighting shape." I lift a hand to ruffle his hair, but he slaps it away.

He shoots me a glare and I laugh. Even though things have drastically changed between us since we came to this gym, I still get the warm fuzzies from fucking with him. I am human, after all.

"I'm selfishly a bit sad that I'm losing my daily grappling partner," Seb says, standing from the mat since he and Elijah have finished for the day. He smirks at Ty. "You better still roll with me. I've learned too much from you to stop now."

The corner of Ty's mouth tips up in a small smile. "We will."

And that tiny trace of a smile sends a ripple of excitement through me. The ever-in-control Tyler Roscoe is slowly learning how to drop his guard, and just enjoy life.

But the second Seb turns away from him, Ty turns to me. "I have some drills I want to work on tomorrow."

Alright. So we're still taking baby steps.

"That's great," Max says with a nod. "Ease into it, then start some light sparring later in the week."

Ty nods, and the look of determination on his face brings on a new level of excitement. Because I know he's going to bring it when we step into the ring tomorrow. And I am too. I need to make up for those times I wanted to punch him over the past month but couldn't.

You know, out of love.

Seb and Elijah head to the locker room while Max goes to his office, but Ty stays rooted to the spot with his eyes locked on the boxing ring. And I can't quite place what it is I'm sensing in him. It's not just anticipation and excitement… There's something else lurking under the surface.

“We’ll start with some kicking drills, then add some punch combos,” Ty says in a low voice, watching as Rosa lays a lethal kick on Noah.

I nod, shifting my gaze from the ring to Ty. “I’m assuming you have thirty days of drills planned out?”

His eyes have a hardness in them as they slide to me. “Our next fight is just over a month away, and I lost a whole month of training in the area I need it most. I’m not going to just wing it.”

I tip my head back with a large sigh. “Great. This should be a fucking blast.”

But I know he’s right. We’re all in hard-core training mode, because this next fight in Dallas could make or break our Legacy Fighting Alliance applications. It’s the last fight before the applications go in, and aside from it being a large and popular event, LFA officials will be there.

And when I think about where we are right now, I still can’t quite believe it. In just a few months, we could be in Vegas, fighting in the biggest developmental organization for MMA fighters. And what’s even more wild, is that the step after LFA is hopefully the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

I glance at Ty again as he stares at the ring, like he’s trying to hold back from jumping in there right now.

“Well,” I say, crossing my arms, “I guess even a Tiger’s punch could use some drills every now and then.”

His gaze slides to me and softens, ever so slightly.

I smile, turning to face him. “But you’ll definitely owe me a dick sucking.”

He sighs and turns away from me, walking towards the locker room.

I follow with a chuckle. “You act like that’s some sort of bother to you, but you came *hard* the other day when my dick was down your thro–”

“You may not be able to hit me right now, but there’s nothing stopping me from hitting you,” he says, glancing over his shoulder at me.

I smile widely, letting it morph into my ‘Ty smile’. The one I crafted just for him because I know he hates it, and it gets him all riled up.

He stops, turning to face me as his jaw tics.

“Oh, you want to hit me hard, don’t you…” I say, stepping closer to him. I tilt my head as I observe the fire in his eyes. “Am I getting under your skin? Ruffling your feathers? Getting you all hot and bother–”

His hand snaps out and grabs my jaw, as his dark eyes bore into mine with an intense heat. I suppress my smile as I stare back at him, letting him do what he needs to do.

His eyes flick between mine as he holds my jaw, tightening his grip to the point it's almost painful. But I stay silent as I let him take what he craves.

Control. Dominance. Order.

Ty may have momentarily lost something that helps him maintain the control he needs in his life, but I can fill that need too.

Sure, I may have to cause the chaos first, but that's a win-win for the both of us.

His eyes drop to my lips, and I swallow as my excitement builds once more. When his eyes lift and meet mine again, I smile against his hand as I take in the softness in them. And when he releases my jaw and turns away from me again, his own small smile tugs at his lips.

But I see it.

My fucking Tiger.

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TWO

AS I PULL the gym door open, the anticipation grows to an overwhelming need. I am so fucking ready for this. Being sidelined for a month while I watched everyone else get ready for this next fight has been torture. And even though I was still able to grapple and work through drills on my own, it wasn't enough. I'm behind, and I need to catch up.

"Hey, Ty," Adão greets me with a big smile as I enter the gym.

"Hey." I nod at him, my eyes immediately sweeping the training area.

"Big day, you excited?"

I bring my gaze back to Adão as he rolls his hand wraps and continues to smile at me.

Adjusting my bag on my shoulder, I give him a smile as well. "Yeah. I'm ready."

A laugh sounds from the other side of the gym, and my eyes follow it to find Luca, casually leaning against a wall and talking to Seb. And a sigh of annoyance escapes me. He's been here for almost an hour now, since he gets off work before everyone else, and he hasn't even changed into his fight shorts yet.

"Kick his ass," Adão says with a wink, pulling a chuckle from me.

"Absolutely."

As I head to the locker room, I bring my focus back to my plan to return to full-training mode. I've had this plan from day one of my time off, and I've remained focused on the steps I needed to get here, and the ones I'll be taking now that I can return to striking. But what I haven't done is allow

myself to think about what it will feel like getting back into it. How I'll finally feel whole again.

"You look determined," Luca says as he falls into step beside me.

"I am." I pull the locker room door open and let it hit him as I enter. "You should try it sometime."

Luca gasps so loudly I can't help but turn around, wondering if the door actually hurt him.

But he's staring at me with his mouth open and his hand over his chest. "Tyler." He slowly shakes his head. "That was witty. Nice one."

I roll my eyes and turn towards my locker. "Fuck off."

"Hm," Luca hums, "not as strong. That one's a little overused."

I take in a deep breath and ignore him as I focus on getting changed. And thankfully he does the same.

"So," Luca says, eventually breaking the silence, as usual. "We didn't get to that dick sucking you promised me."

I glance over my shoulder at him in his bright yellow fight shorts as he tosses his t-shirt in his locker. "I didn't promise you anything."

He walks over to me and leans against the locker beside me, crossing his arms. "Alright then. So no foreplay for this tussle. Afterplay it is. Is that a thing?" He stares off into the distance thoughtfully, with a slight nod. "It will be now."

With yet another sigh, I grab my hand wraps and close my locker door, a familiar question entering my thoughts… How the fuck did I end up falling for him?

But he answers that question when he grabs my elbow before I can turn to leave.

"It'll feel good to have you back in the ring." His hazel eyes flick between mine as he keeps his hand on my elbow. "I've missed it."

I let him pull me in closer, and slide my hand over the moon and stars tattoo on his ribs. "Me too."

His eyes drop to my lips and he smiles softly. "I like it when you're excited and happy."

The corner of my lips tip up into a smile as well. "Me too."

His smile then widens as he lifts his eyes to mine again. "But there's something else that would also feel good…"

And he's back.

I push him away from me and head out the door into the gym, Luca laughing loudly behind me.

When we reach the boxing ring, Max is waiting for us.

“Welcome back, Ty Roscoe.” He smiles, and Elijah and Rosa cheer from the heavy bags behind us.

I lower my gaze to my hands and focus on wrapping them, trying to ignore the attention on me.

“Alright, drills today,” Max says, thankfully getting right into business. “Start with some low kick check drills to warm up, then some kick-punch combos, and if you’re feeling good, finish with a flow drill.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n,” Luca says, then hops into the ring.

I grab my gloves and get in after him, putting them on as adrenaline starts pumping through my veins. This is perfect. Checking kicks will help me get on my defense, condition my shins and work on my form before we put it all together in a flow drill without worrying about the power behind my strikes.

“I think I know the answer to this, but you want to attack or defend first?” Luca asks, shoving his mouthguard in.

I put mine in too, not even bothering to answer that question as I move into striking range.

He chuckles, settling into his stance as well.

And the second my shin makes contact with his as he blocks my kick, the sharp sting makes my soul fucking *sing*. We’re not wearing shin guards because I want to feel it… and I do. It hurts, as it should, and it’s just what I need. And I want more.

As we continue checking each other’s kicks, I focus on my form and speed, adding more power behind each one. And the piece of myself I’ve been missing starts to slide back into place.

Luca bounces on his toes and jumps slightly to my left, landing a low kick that I didn’t get a chance to defend against.

“Ohhh, Ty. Come on, all that work we did to add speed to your fight… don’t tell me we’re back to square one?” Luca says with a smile, still bouncing.

I take a step to adjust my distance from him, and decide to take this a bit further. I quickly land a push kick right to his stomach, catching him off guard. He isn’t quick enough to drop his hands and block it, and a rush of air leaves him as he steps backwards to catch his balance.

“You were saying?” I ask, tapping my gloves together and moving back into my stance.

“Keep it clean,” Max mutters from the side of the ring, letting us do our thing but keeping a watchful eye.

Luca chuckles darkly, moving back into striking range. “Ok then, let’s up the drill. Kick-jab-cross-hook.”

My jaw tics as he eyes me with delight. He knows I have a plan for today’s drills, and that wasn’t one of them.

But we both also know I’m not about to back down from his challenge.

I step into him, immediately landing a left hook kick to his side, which catches his arm and causes him to grunt in displeasure. But he’s fucking fast, and he quickly gets his guard back up to parry my jab and cross, then block my hook.

But that doesn’t even matter, because it felt fucking fantastic.

I let a little smile tug at my lips, and Luca huffs out a laugh.

“I see that felt good.”

“It did.” I nod and let my eyes briefly drop to his side as he shakes out his arm.

Luca smirks at me as I plant myself in my stance again, ready to block his kick. I know he’s not going to hold back, and I don’t want him to.

I move quickly with him, blocking his kick with both forearms, staying in the moment but preparing myself for the next step.

And as I bring my gloves back up in preparation for his jab, I flinch.

The sight of his glove coming towards me brings on a feeling I’ve never experienced before. I block it, but it’s messy and desperate as I step backwards and lose my balance. Instead of parrying his punches, I keep my gloves up to keep him out and end up bringing my focus to my feet to keep steady. I manage to block his hook as he finishes out the drill, but the entire thing was a disaster as I completely lost my focus.

What the fuck?

I raise my eyes to meet Luca’s as he watches me with a furrowed brow.

“Get your feet under you, Ty,” Max says from the side of the ring. “Once you lose your balance, he’s on you.”

I swallow and nod, keeping my gaze on Luca. He eyes me with a silent question, but I refuse to answer it.

“Again,” I say as I move back into range and motion for him to attack.

“But you’re attacking this–”

"*Again.*" My eyes snap up to his, and he hesitates before moving into position as well.

The steps to this drill run through my mind as I prepare myself to see it through, and not let whatever that was happen again. I'm rusty, and I need to get my fucking head back on straight. There's no excuse. I need to stay in the moment, anticipate, plan…

Double block the kick, parry the punches, block the hook.

As Luca's leg swings through the air towards my ribs, I effortlessly block him again and lift my hands to redirect his jab and cross. But once again, when I see his glove moving towards my head, I fight every urge to step backwards and escape it. I raise my hand at the last moment, redirecting his jab and willing my feet to stay put.

But they don't.

I step back as I block his cross, and then another step back when he comes in with his hook.

"Ty, why are you stepping back?" Max's voice sounds from the side of the ring again. "You're giving him an edge, keep your feet planted. You know this."

I do know this. I know it all. I've done this exact drill thousands of times before, and I've blocked and redirected countless hits in fights and spars. I *know* how to do this.

But as I look into Luca's eyes again, something almost like worry is staring back at me.

Because it's not rust causing my missteps.

It's fear.

Fuck.

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THREE

“SO, I think it all comes down to one simple question. High or mid kick point?”

Luca unlocks his apartment door and I push past him, unable to keep listening to his long, drawn-out answer to a question I never asked him. I’m pretty sure he’s talking about a hockey stick he wants to buy, and I’m trying my best to ignore him.

“And I *could* alter the kick point with my hand placement on a mid kick point stick,” he says thoughtfully as he opens the fridge to get dinner ready.

I drop onto the couch and rub my forehead, blowing out a breath of frustration. And not just because Luca has been talking about sticks for thirty fucking minutes, but because of what happened tonight. I’m disappointed, angry… confused. I managed to get through our drills, blocking and redirecting everything I needed to, but it was messy, disorganized, and there were times I almost felt like I wanted to leave the ring. And that feeling scares me more than anything.

“But you know what? A *low* kick point is better when I want a quicker release.”

I turn my head to look at Luca in the kitchen, nodding to himself as he reheats the leftover lasagna from last night. He hasn’t said anything yet about how our drills went tonight, but I know it’s coming. After Max left to work with Noah, Luca suggested another kicking drill and then called it a night, forgoing the flow drill. And I both hate and appreciate that.

“Considering it’s a rec league, I’m not exactly firing those sick one-timers from the top of the circle, you know? So, I think for now, a high kick

point is out.” Luca walks over to the couch, handing me a plate of lasagna.

“Thanks,” I murmur, taking it as he sits beside me with his own plate.

He eyes me as he takes a bite. “You haven’t told me to shut up.”

“Want me to?” I ask, bringing my eyes down to my lasagna.

And to my complete fucking surprise, he doesn’t say anything and we just eat in silence.

For a brief moment.

“So…” he trails off, eyeing me again.

I just shake my head and keep my attention on my dinner, not wanting to go there.

He huffs. “Ok. Well, I know what I saw, and–”

“No you don’t,” I snap, shooting him a glare.

Luca cocks an eyebrow and just stares back at me.

I sigh, pushing my lasagna around with my fork. “I just need to get my head back in it. I’ve never been out of training this long, I’m just… rusty.”

He nods thoughtfully, turning back to his plate. “Alright.”

I glare at him again, as he clearly doesn’t believe me.

Even though I’m not sure I believe myself.

He rolls his eyes. “Fine, how about this? We drill again tomorrow. Same thing, just me and you, and you can get the *rust* off.”

Even though I want to smack the snark right out of him, I nod in agreement as determination sets in. Because that’s exactly what I need. I just need to push through this shit and get over whatever the fuck that was tonight. It’s unacceptable, and with some focused time in the ring, I’ll be able to get back in my routine and clear my head.

“Drills, drills, drills,” Luca mutters as he reaches for the remote on the coffee table. “Oh how I missed your rigid-as-fuck ways of training.”

“It was your fucking idea,” I say as I reach out and grab the remote, setting it on the end table beside me and away from him.

He narrows his eyes in my direction. “Either we watch a movie, or I put music on.”

I hold his gaze for a moment, trying to find a way out of this. But I reluctantly give the remote back to him. At least his cartoons have an ending. The pop music goes all fucking night.

He scrolls his movies on the TV, and selects one about a couple fish looking for another fish.

“You are totally Marlin.” Luca takes the last bite of his dinner and sets his plate on the coffee table.

“And you’re the blue one who can’t take anything seriously,” I say as I do the same.

He turns to me with wide eyes. “The *wit* coming out of you today, Ty. I am seriously impressed.”

I lean back on the couch and try to ignore him, but he just keeps smiling at me.

“What.” I cross my arms, trying not to roll my eyes too hard as the two fish make friends with some sharks.

“You didn’t forget, did you?”

I slide my gaze to meet his, then he rakes his eyes down my body.

“Afterplay,” he says, his smile widening.

And I can’t help the small smile that forms on my lips at the ridiculous name he has for it. Because this idea, I am in full agreement with.

I grab him by the back of the neck, forcefully bringing his lips to mine and pushing my tongue past them. He kisses me with need, and as he swings a leg over my hips to straddle me, I pull him in close and take everything I can.

As we stay locked in our kiss, my hands grasp his hips so I can move him against me and he grinds against my cock. He does as he’s told, sending a rush of pleasure through me. And when I urge him to roll his hips again… he does.

Easily.

I place my hands on his chest and shove him backwards, but he catches himself before he falls.

“What?” he asks, far too innocently, and with an annoying smirk.

He knows exactly what he’s doing, so I just stare up at him as he adjusts himself over my hips again.

“Oh.” He smiles and slides his hands under my shirt as he grinds against me again. “You want a fight, Tiger?” He lowers his lips to my neck and licks up to my ear. “You want to *earn* your control over me, don’t you?”

My fingers slide into his hair and grip tight, then I pull his head back so my lips brush over his. “You know I already have it. Now get on your knees so I can fuck your throat and shut you up.”

He chuckles lightly. “Make me.”

With my grip in his hair, I forcefully shove his head down so he moves onto the floor between my legs. His jaw is tight as he looks up at me, apparently not appreciating that move. But he fucking asked for it.

“Get to work.” I gesture with my chin for him to pull my pants down.

The hardness in his eyes remains for a moment, until his expression morphs into one of amusement. He reaches up to pull my sweatpants and boxers down with a small smile. “Only because I want to.”

But any response I had to that is lost as he wraps his lips around my cock, and my head rolls back with a groan. I exhale as I let him take me, every stroke of his tongue chipping away at the tension and worry from tonight, urging my mind to settle.

Luca continues to work me, sucking harder and faster, demanding I let go of everything I’m hanging on to. My grip in his hair loosens as pleasure rolls over me, and my focus zeroes in on this moment, right here, right now. The feeling of Luca’s mouth on my cock, his hand on my thigh, my fingers in his hair… just me, and him.

As I lower my head to look at him, he lifts his eyes to meet mine. I watch him as he takes me deep in his mouth and slowly slides up my cock. Amusement enters his gaze once more as he takes me to the back of his throat and holds me there, and I tighten my grip in his hair again.

When he releases me from his throat, I yank his head back and take in the anticipation in his eyes. He knows what’s coming, and I keep him waiting as I let my eyes roam over his flushed face and glistening lips.

“Good boy.”

A rush of air escapes him and I let go of his hair, letting him take full control.

“Fuck,” I grunt as he immediately takes me into his mouth again.

Luca sucks me like he can’t get enough, taking me deep and hard, and bringing me closer to the edge as he keeps me completely in the moment.

My hands grip his arms as tingles spread throughout my body. “I’m going to come,” I warn him.

He releases me from his mouth and brings his hand to my cock, pumping me as my release rushes to the surface. With a grunt, I come over my abs and his hand, while he pushes onto his knees and shoves his sweatpants down over his hips.

I watch with heavy breaths as he runs his fingers through my cum and slicks his cock with it. And the next thing I know, I have him on his back on

the couch and I'm between his legs. The way he moans and grabs at me as I take his cum-coated cock into my mouth tells me he's close already, and the taste of me on him is driving me fucking wild.

I look up at him, keeping my eyes on his as I take him deep, pulling moans and groans from him. He's gripping my shoulder tight and biting his lip, and I can tell he's trying to hold back to prolong this. But he's under *my* control now.

I release him from my mouth and stare up at him. His eyes meet mine, and he looks like he's about to challenge me. Instead, he lifts his arms above his head and a small smirk plays on his lips.

"You're not calling the shots here," I say and his eyes sparkle. "So be the good boy I know you can be, and fucking come."

He takes a deep breath in, and I take him back in my mouth. And the second my tongue slides over his cock, he tenses beneath me with a groan.

"Fuck," he pants, tipping his head back. "Fuck yeah, I'm coming."

I keep my mouth and eyes on him as he comes, and watch him as he fights the urge to drop his hands from above his head. But as I crawl up his body and push my tongue past his lips to give him a taste of himself, his hands fall to pull me closer.

And after I swallow the rest of him down, I press my lips to his again. Softer this time, and with a silent thank you for letting me get lost in him, and only him.

"Alright, I think I've decided."

I sigh, pouring coffee in my travel mug as I get ready to head to work. It was wishful thinking to assume I could get out of here before he woke up and started this fucking conversation again. He's not even working today, can't he give me one morning of silence?

"We're going mid kick point." Luca nods seriously as he enters the kitchen and grabs a mug to pour his own coffee. "It's the most versatile option."

“Glad you figured that out,” I mutter, screwing the lid on my mug and heading towards the door.

“Um, excuse me?”

I stop and turn to face him while he stands in the middle of his kitchen in just his lime green boxers and unicorn socks. He holds his tattooed arms out to either side of him with an expectant expression.

I adjust my bag on my shoulder, suppressing another sigh before I walk over to him, pressing my lips to his.

“That wasn’t so hard now, was it?” Luca says, smiling proudly as he opens the fridge. “I have needs, Ty. And good-bye kisses are one of them.”

“A lot of fucking needs,” I say as I watch him pour chocolate milk in his coffee.

He smirks as he leans against the counter and sips his weird chocolate coffee. “And you signed up for it.” He glances between me and his mug as I stare at it in horror, and he just shrugs.

With a shake of my head, I turn towards the door again. “Bye.”

“Remember we’re going to have a good, deep drilling tonight!” he calls after me as I head into the hall, and I quickly close the door to hopefully save anyone from having to hear that. For fuck’s sake.

When I get to work, Jake is already here and getting his bay set up for the day.

“Hey, Ty!” he greets me as I enter the garage.

“Hey.” I nod to him, tossing my phone and keys onto my workbench.

“So?” Jake smiles at me. “How was it? First day back in the ring, I bet it felt good.”

An immediate feeling of unease takes over me at the thought of what happened last night, and how *not* good it felt.

“Yeah.” I nod and give him a small smile, pushing down the unsettling feeling and reminding myself that it all ends tonight. It was a one-time thing, and it won’t happen again.

Jake smiles with a chuckle. “Put Luca in his place?”

I offer a small chuckle in return, even though I know it sounds forced. “Just some drills. Starting slow.” I look down at my bench, pulling out the tools I’ll need for my first job and avoiding Jake’s gaze.

“Good plan. Happy for you, bud.”

I look up at him again, giving him another small, tight smile. “Thanks.”

But as I turn away from him, I close my eyes and sigh. In eight hours, I'll be back in the ring, and can prove that it's all ok. I can get my head back in it, and get over whatever the fuck this is.

Because I am *not* afraid.

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FOUR

I LOVE DAYS OFF.

Lounging on the couch with nowhere to be, jamming to some good tunes, playing some PlayStation… I should really do this more often.

But as great as this day has been, it's about to really pick up. Because it's gym time, and as everyone is still at work, I'll have the whole space to myself.

"Hey, Luca," Max greets me as I enter the gym. "Not working today?"

"Nope." I smile at him. "It's a self-care day. Doing all my favorite things."

Max chuckles. "Good for you." He puts a stack of towels on the shelf and looks over his shoulder at me. "I missed the end of your drills last night. I'm surprised you finished so quickly."

I nod as he continues to eye me, like he's trying to figure something out. Like maybe he knows what I think I know, what Ty apparently doesn't know but probably does and just doesn't want us to know.

"Yeah," I shrug, playing it totally cool, "we skipped out on the flow drill. Excitement of being in the ring with Ty had me wanting to get home real quick, if you know what I mean." I wink at him with a knowing nod.

Max laughs and shakes his head. "Well, ok then."

But as he puts his hands in his pockets and eyes me again, I can tell my deflection isn't working quite as well as I had hoped.

"Hopefully this transition back into training is a good one for him," he says.

I just nod with a smile, hoping for the same and not even entertaining the idea that it won't be.

"There's not much time left until your next fight in Dallas, so I want to go over your training plan," Max says, thankfully moving on and getting down to business. "I want to see you continue your grappling and pull it all together with full sparring."

"Got it," I nod again, this time with determination.

"I'll meet with you and Ty this weekend, and we'll go over your training schedule." Max turns towards his office. "I'll be here working if you need me today."

"Thanks, Max," I say as he heads into his office with a wave over his shoulder.

I make my way to the locker room, looking forward to a nice jog on the track and a bag workout before Ty gets here. But as I silently get ready and look around the quiet, empty space, I regret my decision to come here so early.

I hate quiet. Why did I think this would be nice?

I've been spending too much time with Ty…

But I shake it off and pop my earbuds in, finding a sick playlist to listen to as I head out to the track. "Call Me Maybe" quickly lifts my spirits as I get started on my run, and I let the good tunes distract me from my loneliness. Except there's something else nagging at me, as my thoughts continue to wander back to my conversation with Max earlier.

He wants to see more sparring. And I know that's what both Ty and I want as well. Heading into this next fight, we want to move forward in training and continue to push ourselves to become complete fighters. It's why we're here, and what we've been working so hard for. But I can't help the unsettling feeling I get when I think of how our drills went last night.

Maybe Ty is right, and it is just rust.

Or maybe it's not. I know what I saw… and it wasn't just a misstep or a delayed reaction.

With a shake of my head, I blow out a breath and push those thoughts away. He's Ty fucking Roscoe. He'll get it back.

By the time I'm at the MMA bag and working through some combos, everyone is finally starting to arrive, and I've never been happier to have a full gym. I'm so not meant to be alone. I'm like a little wolf cub that needs

his pack to survive. And honestly, at this point I wouldn't say no to a hug from someone.

Maybe days off aren't so great after all.

"Hi, Luca." Noah smiles at me as he wraps his hands, getting set up at the bag next to mine.

I smile and nod back to him, landing a sick switch kick on the bag.

"Damn." Noah shakes his head and chuckles. "How are you that fucking fast?"

I chuckle as well and step back from the bag, shaking my arms out. "Practice, young grasshopper."

He furrows his brow in confusion. "Isn't it *patience,* young grasshopper?"

Now it's my turn to be confused. "Well, you don't want patience. You need to be quick for a switch kick."

Noah shakes his head and hesitates for a moment. "Oh, I… I mean the saying is patience…" He pauses before waving a hand in the air. "Never mind."

I shrug, turning back to the bag. But before I can start another drill, the door to the gym opens and Ty walks in. He keeps his head down as usual, giving slight nods to everyone as they greet him. I lean against the bag, watching him as he heads straight for the locker room. And just when I think the asshole isn't even going to acknowledge me, he looks up right before he enters the locker room and gives me a small nod.

Good thing I have the bag for support, as I'm weak in the fucking knees.

With a huff and an eye roll, I get back to work while I wait for him to get ready and continue working on switch kicks. The few times I've successfully used these in the cage, and in Muay Thai matches, it's been a complete game changer when I've been able to catch opponents off guard with explosive power in close combat.

Ty being one of them.

He soon exits the locker room, wrapping his hands as he heads directly for the ring, in the zone and *all* business.

This should be fun.

I pull a glove off and grab my water, heading over to join him.

"How was work?" I ask and squirt some water in my mouth.

"Fine."

I huff out a laugh. “*Fine.*”

He shoots me a look and I chuckle. But he just continues to wrap his hands and slide his gloves on.

“My day was excellent,” I say as I slip between the ropes of the ring. “Thanks for asking. Played a little Minecraft, did a little laundry, had a dance party…”

“Hm,” Ty grunts as he enters the ring behind me, clearly too focused to have this conversation right now. Which is fine. I’ll be sure to fill him in on all the details later.

But as I watch him move to the middle of the ring, I sense something more than just focus and being in the zone. And I hate that this means I’m probably right about what I saw in him last night.

“Ready, Tiger?” I ask as I stand across from him.

He finally looks into my eyes and nods, moving into his stance.

“Same drills?” I enter my stance as well, assuming we’ll be starting with checking low kicks again.

“No, combos,” Ty says, his eyes dropping to my gloves. “Kick-jab-cross-hook.”

I furrow my brow at him. The same drill we finished with yesterday…

“Come on, let’s go.” He motions for me to get ready to defend against him.

“Ok,” I say with a sigh, raising my gloves.

As expected, he delivers with power and precision. I block each hit, and the whole thing is textbook. His dark eyes are full of heat, and he looks like he is going to snap at any moment and lay into me. He wants to fight, and he wants to prove he can do this. To me, and to himself.

He blocks my kick as I move to attack, and his hands immediately lift to parry my jab. And he does, but it’s a second too late. He scrambles through the rest of the combo, trying to make up for that hesitation. If this was a fight, I could have easily stepped in and taken him to the ground when his guard was down, or come in low and attacked his body. His focus isn’t where it’s supposed to be, and I know he knows this.

I back up a step and lower my gloves.

“What are you doing?” he snaps, keeping his gloves up. “Keep going.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “You want to–”

“I said keep fucking going.”

I press my lips together to keep from snapping back at him, which is hard as fuck. But I somehow manage to keep my words to myself and lift my gloves, stepping back into position.

Once again, he delivers his attack flawlessly. And once again, he falters in his defense. He parries my jab and cross, and even though it's with a bit more confidence, it's obvious he's still rattled and he loses his footing on the hook.

I sigh and drop my gloves again. "Ty, man. Listen, we–"

"Shut the fuck up and get your gloves up." He doesn't look at me, instead keeping his eyes on my lowered hands as he remains in his stance.

"No." I shake my head. "You need–"

I'm cut off by his shin meeting my upper thigh, then a jab to my chin.

Oh, fuck no.

Immediately, I lift my gloves and block his cross and hook. But I don't step into him. I don't retaliate, as much as I would fucking *love* to. Instead, I drop my gloves again and wait for him to look at me.

And when he finally lifts his eyes to meet mine, it's with an icy, harsh glare.

"Fuck you," he practically spits at me, before he turns and leaves the ring.

I watch as he goes straight to the locker room, passing a concerned looking Rosa. She casts me a worried glance and I shake my head, take in a deep breath, and follow him.

And I don't miss Max leaning against the doorway to his office, arms crossed and observing.

I pull my gloves off and push the door open to the locker room.

"Leave me alone," Ty mutters with his back to me, as he unwraps his hands at his locker.

"You don't get to say that to me anymore. You're *not* alone." I cross my arms and glare at his back.

Ty sighs and tosses his wraps in his locker but doesn't turn around.

"You need to let me in at some point." I exhale, forcing myself to chill a bit. "Moon and stars, remember?"

He turns to face me, and I'm surprised to see the anger has been replaced with… defeat?

He sighs and sits on the bench. "I don't even know what it is I'm feeling."

I nod, knowing this is likely hard for him to come to terms with. I don't think fear is something Ty has ever had to face head on. He rubs his forehead with his hand, looking frustrated.

"One of a tiger's biggest threats is a d-hole."

His eyes fly up to meet mine and I nod seriously.

"What the fuck is a d-hole?" he asks, his brows drawn together in confusion.

"They're wild dogs." I shrug. "And they're called dholes, but d-hole just sounds better."

Ty continues to stare up at me, apparently waiting for more information.

"D-holes prey on tigers, but their attacks are pretty rare." I sit beside him on the bench. "If a tiger tries to run, they could kill him."

His eyes drop to the floor, and I see the tension in his jaw.

"But if a tiger chooses to fight, he can take out a d-hole in a single swipe."

He turns his head to look at me and I smile.

"Because a tiger's punch is deadly," I say, pulling a small smile from Ty. "And Josh Harn is a dickhole."

Ty lets out a light laugh, and my smile widens.

"Hens," he corrects me.

I wave a hand in the air. "Whatever."

We're both silent for a moment as Ty drops his eyes again and sighs.

"I'm scared."

I nod. "Yeah. Makes sense."

And I know I don't need to say more than that. Ty came close to losing the only thing he had ever loved, and the one thing that has helped him feel in control of his life. Without it, he doesn't know who he is. And to put himself back in that position to potentially lose it all again has to fuck with his head. I know I've had a hard time coming back from a rough hit before, and it wasn't anything close to his dirty-as-fuck knockout and concussion.

"The next fight is just over a month away. How the fuck am I going to do this?" Ty asks, still looking down at the floor.

"We," I say, and he looks up at me again. "*We* are going to do this."

His eyes flick between mine, and I smile.

"We're going to have a Rocky moment." I nod and grab his arm as excitement takes over. "I'm going to train you up so good. We can do, like,

a training montage, and find some stairs to run up–”

“No.”

I roll my eyes. “Figures, you’re no fun at all.”

He’s silent for another moment before he asks a question that I think we’re both surprised to hear.

“You’ll help me?”

I nod and bump his shoulder with mine. “Yeah, I will.”

Ty takes a deep breath in and exhales, looking up to the ceiling.

“But first.”

He lowers his head to meet my eyes.

“You’ll need to apologize for that very uncalled for *fuck you* out in the ring.” I hold his gaze as he draws his brows together.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” I nod.

He stares at me in confusion for a moment longer. Which is fair, we’re not the apologizing type.

He shakes his head slightly. “Ok. I guess… Sorry I–”

“Not with your words, you idiot.” I stand up, shaking my head at him in disbelief that he was going to fucking *apologize*. “By actually fucking me. You know you can’t tease me like that.”

Ty stares up at me for a moment before he closes his eyes and sighs.

I smile, assuming I’ll pay for this later.

“Come on.” I open my locker, pulling out my clothes. “Fuck me first, then we’ll fuck up some d-holes.”

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FIVE

I'M DESPERATELY TRYING to ignore the feeling of everyone's eyes on me as I follow Luca out of the gym, but I can't. Because it's an unnerving feeling, knowing that they all saw exactly what happened here tonight. They know I tried, and that I failed.

And with every step I take towards the gym door, guilt sets in. This isn't what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm not supposed to be running away. I have a fight soon, and I need to train. I've already missed so much, and now I'm just falling further and further behind.

Luca pushes the door open, but the second I step into the dark parking lot, I stop.

"I should be training."

"No," Luca says, continuing to walk towards his Jeep. "We're done for tonight."

Annoyance burrows deep within me as I scowl at his back. "You just gave me a whole fucking talk about not running away, but that's exactly what you're telling me to do now."

Luca sighs, as if *he's* annoyed, and turns to face me. "Dude, you need to chill. You are way too fucking stressed to be going at it in there tonight."

I squeeze my hands at my sides so hard I think I'm going to break my fucking fingers. "I'm stressed because I'm *not* doing anything tonight. I've barely done any training in these two days now that I'm finally able to–"

"But you're not able to."

It takes everything in me not to step into him and knock his fucking teeth out.

He rolls his eyes, and steps closer to me. “Ok. So, let’s say you go back in.” He gestures behind me to the gym. “Then what? What are you realistically going to achieve tonight that you can’t tomorrow?”

“I’ll work the bag or lift some–”

“My *god*.” Luca tips his head back with a groan. “Let it go, Ty. You’re allowed to take some time to gather yourself, and just have a break. You don’t need to work *all the fucking time*.”

Those words hit me somewhere deep, and I forcefully exhale. I don’t have a response to that, and I hate that it means he’s probably right.

“You asked for my help, so let me help you.” He puts his hands in his pockets and observes me, waiting for me to argue with him.

“I didn’t *ask* for your help.” I glare back at him.

Luca shakes his head and tsks. “No, you definitely did.”

“No, you offered. I accepted.”

“Same thing.” He shrugs.

“It’s not,” I say. “And I’m starting to regret it.”

Luca just shrugs again, and gestures for me to go back into the gym.

When I don’t, he smiles widely. And the annoyance settles once again.

“Come on.” Luca turns to his Jeep. “It’s Friday night. We’re going to have some fun.”

But I don’t follow him, watching as he pulls open the passenger side door of his Jeep.

“So your idea of helping me is to fuck?”

He shakes his head. “We have something else to do first, and it’s very important.” He holds the door open and dramatically gestures for me to get in.

“What?” I ask, wary of his plans.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Of course it is,” I mutter.

“Would you just fucking get in already?” Luca asks, gesturing again to the passenger seat of his Jeep.

I sigh, resigning to my fate and getting in. Whatever this is, I know I’m probably not prepared for it.

Luca drives us to an area near downtown that I’ve never been to before, and pulls up in front of a building. Over the door is a neon sign, reading ‘Level One’.

“What is this?” I ask, peering out at the building as a group of people enter.

“Let’s go.” Luca hops out the Jeep, and I take a deep breath as I follow, trying so fucking hard not to lose it on him.

“Will you just fucking tell me what we’re doing?” I ask as he walks to the door of the building.

He doesn’t answer as he pulls it open, and as we enter, he gestures around with a proud smile.

As I look around the space, I almost laugh. It’s 100% Luca.

In the middle of the large space is a bar, with couches, tables and chairs scattered around. But Luca didn’t bring me to just any bar. Lining every wall of this space are arcade games, both old school and modern.

“I can’t kick your ass for real just yet,” Luca says, drawing my attention to him. “So, this will have to do for now.”

I glance around the space again, observing a group of people laughing on one of the couches. “This is what was so important?”

“Yes.” Luca nods and turns to face me. “It’s important that you have some fucking fun. You’re wound tight on a *good* day, and right now… oof.” He draws his brows together and shakes his head. “And I don’t want to see where this is going if we don’t release some of that pressure.” He pokes at me, and I shoot him a look as I step away from him.

He chuckles. “So. One night. One night to get your mind off everything, and just have some fun. Then we start fresh. We’ll get up bright and early tomorrow,” he winces, “go to the gym and start with a new plan to work through this.”

I glance around the bar once more, and my eyes land on a couple playing a *Pac-Man* game in the corner. They’re laughing and enjoying themselves, and they look like they don’t have a care in the world. As I bring my eyes back to Luca, he’s watching me with a hopeful expression.

But before I can say anything he holds up a finger. “Ah,” he points his finger dangerously close to my face, “don’t say fine.”

I bat his hand away, and his smile remains.

“*Alright.*”

“That’s the spirit!” He smacks my back and walks towards the bar.

Give me the fucking strength.

I follow him, and he leans against the bar holding up two fingers to the bartender. “Two IPAs.”

I try to ignore the voice telling me I shouldn't have a beer as I'm supposed to be preparing for a fight, and instead try to focus on his words from just a moment ago. One night. It's just one night.

And as the bartender slides the beers across the bar, and Luca shoves one into my hand, I guess I can admit that it does look fucking good. And yeah… I could use one.

I take a drink and glance around at the games. "So, what do we do?"

"Ah, yes." Luca nods. "I keep forgetting you're new to fun. So, you pick a game," he gestures to the games around us, "which is a structured type of play, by the way. Usually for fun or entertainment. Wait." He holds his hand up. "I feel like I'm getting ahead of myself here. Play is engaging in an activity for enjoyment and recreation–"

"For fuck's sake, Mitchell, I will walk right out of here." I glare at him and he just chuckles, gesturing with his head to a token machine beside us.

He takes out a twenty-dollar bill and slips it in. The machine then spits out a shit ton of tokens.

"The fuck, how long are we going to be here?" I ask, looking at the pile of tokens in his hand.

He looks down at the tokens, then at me. "You want more?"

"More than that heap?" I point at his hands as he tries to fit them all in his pocket.

"This isn't even that many. Trust me, you'll want to play every game here and we'll need more." He nods seriously and takes a drink of his beer. "So, pick a game."

I look around, but I have no idea where to even begin. "You're the expert."

"Yeah, that's true." Luca nods.

And as he looks around the bar to pick a game, I can't help but let out a small smile as his eyes sparkle with excitement like a kid in a candy store.

"Got one." He smiles and nods towards the other side of the bar.

I follow him, and he stops in front of Skee-Ball, setting his beer on a table beside the game and rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"The ass kicking begins here. Because I'm Skee-Ball champ," he says as he puts tokens into the machine. "So, you need to pick up the ball and roll it–"

"I know how to fucking play," I say as I pick up a ball from the chute and roll it up the lane. It lands in the fifty ring, and Luca just stares at it for

a moment.

He nods tightly, picking up one of his balls and rolling it, sending it into the ten-point ring.

“Good one, champ.” I nod at him, and he shoots me a look, immediately picking up another ball.

With a chuckle, I turn back to my game and continue rolling balls up the lane, ignoring him until I’m all out. And when I look at the score, I smile. 280-210, making me the winner.

Luca stares at the scoreboard, then his gaze slides to me. He picks up his beer and narrows his eyes. “Air hockey.”

I shrug, picking up my beer as well. “Alright.”

He eyes me once more, then turns and walks towards the air hockey table.

Ok, so maybe this could be fun.

Luca puts tokens into the air hockey table, looking determined. “I’m not giving you any pointers for this one.”

“Don’t need them anyway,” I say, picking up my striker.

He cocks an eyebrow at me from his side of the table. “Getting cocky now, are we?”

“It’s air hockey. It’s not that hard.”

He smiles, placing the puck in the middle of the table. “Grab a menu, Ty. Because you’re about to get served.”

I roll my eyes, leaning forward to smack the puck into his end. He blocks it, but the next strike I get, I score on him.

He lifts his eyes to me, and his jaw tics.

“Did you just hear a bell?” I ask him and his brow furrows. “Because someone just got schooled.”

Luca’s jaw drops and his eyes light the *fuck* up as he points at me. “Oh my god! That was *good*.” He grabs the puck and puts it back in the middle of the table. “I could almost let you get away with scoring on me because of that. But I’m taking it back now.”

And unfortunately, he does, as he scores on me next. But I keep a lead on him until we’re nearing the end, when he scores and brings us to a tie with one goal left.

“Ooh,” Luca smirks at me. “You need to make a comeback, Ty. Think you can do it?”

“Considering I’ve had the lead this whole time and this wouldn’t be a *comeback*, yes,” I say, placing the puck on the table.

Luca shrugs. “Doesn’t matter anyway, I’m taking this.”

“Hm,” I mutter, suppressing my smirk as he gets into an intense battle stance and shakes out his shoulders.

And I score.

“For fuck’s sake.” Luca tosses his striker on the table.

“You said I needed a comeback,” I say as I pick up my beer and take a drink.

Luca rolls his eyes. “Thought it wasn’t a comeback?”

“You’re right it wasn’t.” I nod. “I already got my comeback when I licked it off your cock last night.”

Luca stops mid drink and stares at me. He slowly lowers his glass, eyes wide. “Damn. That’s fucking hot. I don’t even have words.”

“That’s a first,” I mutter into my beer.

We continue playing various games in the bar, and as the night goes on I let myself fall deeper into the moment, just being here with him and doing something completely new and weird. By the end of the night, I can confidently say I’ve enjoyed myself, and haven’t thought once about anything outside of the walls of this bar. This is a part of me that only Luca can pull out… and I’m thankful for that. As frustrated as I was with him tonight, I can appreciate his weird-as-fuck ways of doing things.

Sometimes.

When our tokens are gone, including the extra ones Luca bought, he drains his beer and steps closer to me. My eyes drop to his lips as they curve up in a soft smile, and then he gently brushes them over mine.

“I think it’s time we get to that fucking now.”

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SIX

THE SECOND THE door to my apartment closes behind us, my lips are on Ty's. Our hands frantically remove each other's jackets and shirts, and as his lips fall to my neck and I run my hands up his bare back, I feel what I've been seeing in him all night. He's allowing himself to take a break from the rigidity that continues to rule his life, and the stress from the past couple days. And while this side of Ty has been coming out to play more often, it's especially needed tonight. To see him just let it all go for a few hours and have fun was the best foreplay I could have asked for.

Not that I don't want more.

As I walk him backwards towards the bedroom, lips locked, I let myself get lost in him too. The feeling of his lips on mine, his stubble on my chin, his hands gripping my hips, the anticipation of his cock in my ass–

"Fuck," he grunts as his back hits the doorframe to the bedroom, and I bump into him. He pushes me back with a wince. "Watch where you're fucking going."

I chuckle. "What. Can't handle it rough, Tiger?"

Ty narrows his eyes at me, but I just smile, dropping my hands to push my pants down and step out of them. His eyes travel down as I do the same with my boxers, and when he brings his gaze back up to meet mine, the annoyance is replaced with hunger.

I gesture with my chin to his pants, which for some reason are still on, and fist my cock. "Your turn."

The anticipation grows as I watch him step out of his pants and towards me, batting my hand away so he can take over stroking my hard cock. And

as our lips crash together again, it's heated, messy, and perfect. With nothing weighing either of us down, we devour each other like we're starved and nothing else in this world matters. And as his hand slides up my chest and wraps around my throat, I smile against his lips. I may have tamed the Tiger, but he's still a wild beast. And tonight, this beast needs to fucking *roar.*

"How do you want your prize?" I pant against his lips.

He pulls back and looks at me with confusion. "What?"

"You won an epic arcade battle tonight. So, you get a prize." I smile, reaching between us to grasp his hard cock. "Which is me, by the way."

His grip tightens on my throat, and I swear I see amusement flicker in his dark eyes. "You think I need to win a competition to claim this ass as mine?"

Damn. Great answer.

He quickly turns me around and pushes me face first onto the bed. And just as I'm about to whirl around and show him how much that move isn't going to fly, he kneels between my legs and palms my ass. With a smile, I look over my shoulder at him.

"Ah, so you want to celebrate with a treat. While traditionally it would be celebratory cake, a little cinnamon sugar will do, huh?"

He stares back at me with a look of uncertainty and horror. "What?"

I just chuckle as I briefly consider explaining to him how much he really does like my cinnamon roll, but nah. It's time to dig in.

I push my ass back into his hands. "Get lickin'."

He tightens his grip, squeezing my ass so hard I hold back a wince. But I keep my smile in place. He may have earned his prize, and a damn good one at that, but I just can't help it. I can't let him win *that* easily.

Ty's hand lands on my back and he forcefully pushes me flat on the bed. But before I can fight him off, his tongue glides over my hole, and the only thing I can do is moan.

"Fuck," I groan as he licks me again, and I melt into the bed. The pressure of his tongue, and the warm, wet sensation has me falling apart already. I'm moaning, writhing, and pushing back against him as he licks and sucks my hole, and I need even more.

"Yeah, eat it up," I moan into my comforter. "Take your prize."

Ty grunts in annoyance and grabs my hips in a bruising grip. But he pushes his tongue into me, which tells me he *does* in fact want his prize.

“Mm, yeah,” I pant as he continues to work me. “Go for gold. Climb that podium, claim that medal–”

“For *fuck’s* sake.” Ty forcefully rolls me onto my back and grabs my throat again, staring down at me. “You are so fucking annoying.”

“Maybe. But you still like eating my ass.”

Ty stares at me for a moment longer before he reaches over to grab the lube from the bedside table, keeping his other hand wrapped around my throat. He tosses the lube onto my chest. “Since you can’t shut up, you can get yourself ready.”

My heart skips a beat as I look up at him between my legs, and smile. “Gladly.”

As I pour lube onto my fingers and rub my hands together, my eyes stay glued to his. But as I bring one lubed hand to his cock, and the other to my ass, his eyes fall from mine and a breath escapes him.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, watching as I slowly stroke his cock and rub a finger over my hole.

I continue to jerk him and push a finger into my ass, swallowing hard against his hand on my throat. As much as I wish it was his cock in my ass right now, the look on his face as he watches me finger myself and stroke his dick is a very close second.

I push another finger inside me and increase my pace on us both, working us until we’re moaning, breathing heavy and needing more.

He suddenly grabs my hands and lifts them above my head. The look in his eyes is feral as he holds my wrists, nudges my legs wide and lines himself up to push into me. And as he does, a wave of ecstasy rolls over my entire body.

“Holy fuck,” I moan as I tilt my head back, arching into him as his lips fall to my chest and his tongue glides over my nipple. My body lights up as I let him slam into me, hitting every button with his touch, his tongue, and his cock, quickly putting me at his mercy.

“Harder,” I pant. “Fucking take me.”

Ty grunts into my neck and pounds into me, full of the intense need we’re both feeling. I let him take everything from me, and he feels so fucking good that I continue to let him dominate. My wrists remain in his grasp above my head as he fucks my ass, and with every thrust, he brings me closer to the edge.

“Fuck, Ty,” I grunt. “Fuck, you’re going to make me come.”

He releases my wrists and pulls my hand down to my cock, urging me to stroke myself. “Then come,” he says, moving his hand to grip my leg tightly. He looks like he’s close too, so I just smirk up at him.

“What’s the plan here, Tiger?” I run both my hands down his abs, and he stills his hips. “We’re not just running into this blind, are we?”

His lips tilt up in a small smirk, then he leans over, bringing his mouth close to mine. “No.” His lips brush over my jaw, and his warm breath on my neck sends a shiver down my spine. “In that case, you’re going to wait for me.” Ty traces his tongue up my jaw to my ear. “You’ll let me come first. And once I’m done filling your ass, you can make a filthy mess of yourself.”

A breath escapes me, and I place a hand on his chest to push him back. “Then you better hurry up, because I’m fucking close.”

And with that, we’re back to a good, dirty *fuck.* The sounds of moans, groans and skin slapping takes over the space as he fucks me, and I do everything I can to keep from blowing right here and now.

“Fuck,” Ty grunts as I feel him tense, and thank *god* because I can’t fucking hold out any longer.

Tingles spread through my body as I watch Ty come, and as he groans through his release, mine rushes to the surface as well.

As Ty fills my ass, I finally drop my hand to my cock. And after a couple strokes, I’m shooting ropes of cum over my abs. Ty pushes himself back, slipping out of me as he runs his fingers through my cum. And when he pushes his fingers into my ass, I feel like I’m coming all over again.

“Jesus Christ,” I murmur as I roll my head back, riding out the last of the intense wave of pleasure from his fingers rubbing over my prostate.

And when he lies down beside me, both of us breathless and staring at the ceiling, he surprises me yet again.

“How’s that for a comeback?”

I’m jolted awake by the shrill sound of a beeping alarm and frantically reach for my phone to shut it the fuck up. It’s *Saturday.* And as I glance at

the phone screen, I'm now even more pissed off. It's 6:30 *AM* on a *Saturday.*

The space beside me in bed is empty, so I throw the blankets back and whip open the bedroom door to glare at Ty, as he peacefully sits on the couch, drinking coffee and looking lost to his thoughts.

"You set my fucking alarm?"

He just nods at me. "Yeah."

I continue to stare him down as he just gazes back at me, unfazed.

"*You* said bright and early." He casually takes a drink of his coffee, and I try not to launch myself at him with fists of fury.

With a large sigh and a mean side-eye, I make my way into the kitchen. "I see the fun police have rolled back into town." I grab a mug and pour myself some coffee. "Couldn't even pick a good song to wake up to," I mutter.

"I want to start with body sparring," Ty says, turning to look at me. "Then–"

"Dude." I hold up a hand and shake my head, closing my eyes. "It's 6 fucking AM after a night of having my ass handed to me in multiple ways, then brutally thrust awake from a peaceful slumber. Give me a fucking moment."

His jaw clenches as he watches me take a slow, delicious sip of my coffee, and I let the warm nectar of the gods heal my beaten ass and tired soul.

I sit beside him on the couch and smile. "Oh hey. Good morning. I slept very well, thank you for asking. And aw, so sweet. It's so nice waking up next to you as well."

Ty glares at me. "You're the one that came in here with an attitude."

I scoff. "And why is that? Whatever happened to a gentle wake-up kiss or snuggle?"

His brow furrows, like he can't believe I just said that. "The fuck?"

"Yeah, the fuck is right." I nod. "Like I said, Ty, I have needs. We'll work on your snuggle game." I lift my mug to take a drink but stop as an amazing realization pops into my head and I reach out to smack Ty's chest. "Oh my god. *This* can be our Rocky moment. How did I not see this? All this time, I *have* been training you. Ty, the hard-ass bad boy, in a relationship, learning how to love and snuggle–"

“Drink your fucking coffee and let’s go.” Ty shoves my hand off his chest and stands up, heading into the kitchen.

I chuckle as I watch him go, but then I get up to follow him.

As he sets his mug in the sink, I wrap my arms around his waist from behind and rest my chin on his shoulder. “Ass beatings and alarms aside… I love you.”

He stills for a moment before he turns in my arms, looking into my eyes with a soft nod. “Love you, too.”

“But we’re still going to work on the snuggles.” I nod and Ty rolls his eyes, pushing me back. I tap his cheek with a laugh. “Come on, stop messing around. We’re late and have some serious work to do.”

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SEVEN

WITH EVERY STEP I take towards the boxing ring, the energy inside me builds. And as it flows through me, crackling and igniting my senses, a familiar urge rises. One that brings the usual anticipation and excitement to strap on my gloves and work through a drill or spar, to plan and anticipate, develop my skill, and push my limits. To feel the thrill of taking a hit, knowing that I can easily return it and move the fight in the direction I want it to go.

Because I'm now fighting against something I am completely unfamiliar with. And I *will* be controlling it.

"And another thing, sleeping in is good for your health. A good night's sleep does wonders for your mood. So, I mean, you could use more sleep."

And Luca's annoying fucking mouth is certainly contributing to the growing need to hit something.

I slip through the ropes of the ring after him, tuning out his rambling as I strap on my gloves. I feel ready. I can do this.

I *need* to do this.

Fear is not going to ruin me.

As I shake out my arms and blow out a breath, Luca finally shuts his mouth and observes me for a moment. We're the only ones in the gym this morning, as anticipated, and I'm thankful for that. I need to get my head back in this without the pressure of everyone watching. They saw what happened yesterday… they know.

"So, body sparring." Luca taps his gloves together and cocks an eyebrow at me.

I nod. “Yeah.”

He nods as well, thoughtfully. “Not what I expected.”

“And what did you *expect*?” I ask, tension entering my muscles as I prepare for whatever bullshit he’s about to spew.

“Drills,” he says simply, with a shrug of his shoulders. “But, as your trainer, I do actually agree with your choice. In general, body sparring is useless, so usually I would hard-core roll my eyes at you for suggesting such an absurd thing.”

All I can do is glare at him and keep my jaw clenched. Of course this is going to his fucking head, and I know that very soon I’m going to regret accepting his help.

“But it’s a smart move,” he continues, and those words take me by surprise. “You get to focus on technique, work on speed, angles, positioning, and footwork against an opponent with body shots only. Eventually we add in feints to the head, building it up to take a full headshot. You’re still training in striking to prepare for the fight, but… not pushing yourself into anything too soon.”

My glare softens as his words sink in. As insufferable as he is going to be during this whole process, he does get it. And I’m glad he understands.

His lips quirk up in a smile as he raises his gloves. “So let’s get this party started.”

With a nod, I raise my gloves as well and settle into my stance. The familiarity rushes back in as I step towards him, taking a deep breath in and readying myself for what I am meant to do. This is where I am supposed to be and where I belong. The underlying edge I’ve been feeling since I returned from my concussion is confusing, but as I take in the feeling of my gloves on my hands, the ring floor beneath my feet and the sparkle in Luca’s eyes, it all settles. And I can’t help but huff out an amused breath at that. He used to piss me off more than anything, making me angry beyond belief, desperate to fight and inflict a maximum amount of pain. And now, I’m grateful for his presence here as he helps me through something I never thought I would have to face. Something I don’t want to have to face without him.

And even as he taps his gloves together with a wide smile and bounces on his feet, an action that used to make my blood fucking boil in a fight against him, I find comfort in it.

In him.

I hold out my glove and Luca stops his hopping, tapping my glove with his.

As I step in towards him, I block everything else out. The worry, the frustration, the fear of never being able to fight again… I push it all aside and try to bring my focus into this moment, right here. It's just me and Luca, with no expectations, and an understanding. I let his words echo in my head as I blow out a breath in preparation for my first hit on him. As frustrating as it is not to just pick up training where I left off, I know I can't push myself into anything too soon.

I start with some jabs to Luca's body, which he easily blocks and returns. It feels good to hit and block him, but when his jab leaves his head open, I fight the urge to land a straight punch to the side of it. It's exactly what I would do if this was a fight or full spar, but instead I quickly move to the right, focusing on my feet and landing a right hook on his open ribs.

The grunt that escapes him sends a surge of exhilaration through me, and I immediately lift my hands again, ready to dish out more.

"Maintained a bit of that speed we worked so hard on after all," he says through a low, dark chuckle.

"A bit?" I step in again, landing a jab on his forearm and then a cross to his body. But just as I start to step out of his reach, he counters it with a hook, right under my ribs.

"Yeah, a bit," he says, hopping to the side with a smirk. "And you still think too much. Saw that one coming a mile away."

My eyes narrow on him as I settle into my position again, thinking this would be a lot easier if I could just punch him in the mouth. But I can make the most out of body sparring today, slowing him down and draining his stamina by continually attacking his body. Which is something I've been wanting to pull into my fights anyway. With body shots, I can slow and immobilize opponents that get fixated on hitting the head, which many do, and it will create more opportunities for me to land headshots and gain the edge.

I step in, bringing my right hand to his midsection in a straight punch. And even though it gets him, he recovers quickly. But before he can rotate to get a hit on me, I step to his outside and trap him to his right. And in my head, I see at least five other ways this would have gone if he could hit my head or bring his knee into it. If he countered with an uppercut, I could have–

“*Stop*,” Luca groans as he maintains his position, quickly moving out of my control and landing a combo on me, finishing with yet another fucking hook to the ribs.

“Stop *what*,” I snap at him, stepping back to create distance and keep my eyes on his gloves.

“You are in *this* moment, in *this* fight. I know you are thinking about what we *could* be doing, so fucking stop it.” He keeps his gloves up, stepping sideways slightly, and I follow him.

“There’s nothing fucking wrong with thinking about what I would do in an *actual* fight,” I say, the need to punch his face growing at an alarming rate.

“Oh?” He tilts his head slightly and suddenly rushes into me, laying a few lethal hits to my body, and all I can do is scramble to defend and try not to give him the satisfaction of showing how brutal his hits to the ribs are. I manage to get him up against the ropes as I push him back, but he quickly ducks under my arm and corners me.

“And how did we get here then, Ty? Doesn’t seem like you were very in the moment.” He shakes his head with a *tsk*.

Every muscle in my body tenses as I fight the urge to take this fucker straight to the ground and show him just how *in the moment* I can be. “Fuck you, Mitchell.”

Luca just smiles. “Later. For now, those feet need to get moving.” He taps his gloves together again, bouncing on his toes as he backs up, giving me space to move into him. He opens his arms wide with a wicked grin. “Come and get me, Tiger.”

The anger continues to bubble as I watch him smile and hop around, and the irony of him telling me to be in the moment while he can’t even be serious about this is not lost on me.

So I let that anger fuel me.

This time when I step into him, I come in with a stream of combos, immediately taking the edge and dominating him. And as we move around the ring, hitting and blocking, it feels effortless. He’s fast and nimble as usual, but I manage to stay on top of him and take back the control I crave after he takes it from me. I let myself get completely lost in this feeling, as comfort and familiarity finally settles. And when we finally drop the gloves, with throbbing ribs and arms, I feel like I’m finally on my way home.

“Looking good.”

We both turn to the side of the ring, where Max is leaning against the ropes watching us.

“Hey,” Luca says, pulling a glove off. “Didn’t see you come in.”

Max chuckles and gestures with his head towards the locker room. “Rosa, Seb and Noah are here too. You guys were in the zone, so we left you to it.”

I nod, pulling a glove off and running my fingers through my damp hair. I’ll never admit it to him, because I’ll never hear the end of it, but I guess Luca really did get me *in the moment*.

“So, body sparring, huh?” Max asks, his eyes sliding to me.

A laugh sounds from the locker room, and I look over Max’s shoulder as Rosa, Seb and Noah exit and make their way towards us. I keep my eyes on them, avoiding Max’s gaze as I just nod. “Yeah.”

I can feel him watching me as the others approach the ring, and I hate that I’m keeping this from him. I don’t want to lie to him… but I think I’m realizing this fear is running deeper than I thought. It’s not just another hit to the head. It’s the fear that I won’t be ready for the next fight. Or even the one after that. And at what point will Max replace me on this team if I can’t perform at the level he expects of me?

“Hey, guys.” Rosa smiles at us as she leans against the ropes next to Max. “You’re here early. What are you working on?”

Luca shifts next to me, and I turn my head to look at him. He unwraps his hands as he tilts his head and softly raises his eyebrows. Leave it to this moment for him to finally keep his mouth shut. But I know why. He’s waiting for me to do what I need to do. And as I look into his eyes, I find the encouragement I need. I was honest with him, and because of that I was able to make progress today. And now I need to let everyone else in too.

I can still feel Max watching me, patiently waiting for my answer, so I drop my eyes to my gloves as I pull the other one off. “Body sparring,” I say, and take a deep breath. “I’m just… having a hard time getting back into head strikes.”

“Oh, buddy,” Seb says, drawing my attention to him as my heart thunders in anticipation. “Been there. Fuck, once I got my bell rung so bad I almost quit. And it was just in training. Had to be dragged back into the cage.”

Rosa nods with wide eyes. “I flinched at every punch for months after my first bad cut. Took me a while to come back from that.” She smiles

warmly. “Considering what you’ve been through, I’d say you’re doing just fine.”

“She’s right,” Max says, and I finally look at him. He nods slightly, with a softness in his eyes. “You had a nasty injury, but it’s more than just taking another hit. It’s risking it all, every time you step into the cage. And after coming close to almost losing it all, that can really fuck with you. I’ve known many fighters who have called it quits after facing something similar, and fighters who try to push it all down deep and keep going without dealing with it. And neither of those are an option at Fairburn MMA.” He smiles, and a rush of relief flows through me. “*And* none of those fighters were Ty fucking Roscoe.”

“Got that right,” Seb nods with a wink, and I can’t help the small chuckle that bubbles to the surface.

“Anything you need, Ty, we’re here,” Noah says with a smile.

“Thanks,” I say, looking between Max, Seb, Rosa and Noah. As I take in their smiling faces, a small smile forms on my lips as well. I’ve only known them a few months, but since the day I met them they’ve only shown me care and support. And that’s something I’m slowly getting used to.

I slide my eyes to Luca, and he smiles. “Tigers fuck up d-holes.”

I huff out a laugh and nod. “Yeah.”

“The fuck?” Seb asks, his face twisting in confusion.

“Hm.” Luca nods knowingly at him. “I know. And *this* Tiger fucked *me* up last night, if you know what I mean, so excuse me while I go ice my ass.”

I close my eyes with a sigh as Seb chokes on his water and Rosa cackles.

“Oh my *god*,” Luca says, and I open my eyes as he whirls around to face me again. He dramatically points at the clock on the wall. “It’s only 8:30 *fucking* AM, and we’ve already had a full fucking workout.”

“Again, your idea,” I point out, pushing past him to exit the ring.

He follows me with a scoff. “No, my idea was *early.* Not *this* early. Especially since you set a fucking *alarm* after fucking me into–”

“Ok.” Max holds a hand up and blows out a breath, shaking his head. “Luca, go… do what you need to do. Ty, work on takedowns with Seb.”

Luca glares at me for a moment longer, before his expression softens and his lips tilt up in a soft smile. And as I hold his gaze, I can’t help but

smile as well, and send him a silent thank you.

As irritating as he can be, he’s also the only one that can really get me out of my head, and help me find my way home.

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EIGHT

“WHAT TIME IS IT, MR. WOLF?”

“3 o’clock!”

I chuckle at the sound of giggles from the first graders as they take three steps towards me and Ira at the end of the gym.

“What time is it, Mr. Wolf?” the class calls out again, some of them sounding *much* closer than three steps would have taken them.

I briefly glance over my shoulder to see a couple of the boys inching closer, before looking down to Ira as he keeps his back to them. “What do you think?”

Ira looks up at me with a thoughtful expression. “Lunch.”

I nod with a smile and tip my head towards his classmates behind us. “Go for it.”

His face breaks out in a huge grin as he yells, “Lunch time!” and turns around to chase his friends. And the little guy does an excellent job, letting out his inner speed demon and tagging five of them to join him as Mr. Wolf.

By the end of the class, and four more rounds of a very chaotic and not at all accurate game of What Time Is It Mr. Wolf, I’m smiling ear to ear and having a fantastic Monday morning. Especially since it’s now recess and I plan to join Dan for playground duty. Fresh air, sunshine, and showcasing my talents as the best swing pusher in Missouri… What more could I ask for?

As I exit the school into the chilly February air, I spy Dan at the edge of the playground helping a student with her coat.

“Hey, man.” I join him as the little girl runs off to join her friends.

“Hey.” Dan smiles. “I haven’t seen you in awhile. You weren’t at hockey on Thursday and then didn’t work Friday. I feel like I need a full catch-up.”

I chuckle and spot some of the second and third graders at the swings waving me over.

It’s my time to shine.

“Yeah,” I nod as Dan and I make our way over to them, “it was nice to have Friday off. And I needed to be in the gym Thursday.”

“Mr. Mitchell, I want to go *high*,” one of the boys, Grayson, says seriously as he settles onto the swing. “Higher than Matilda.”

“No, I want to go higher!” Matilda furrows her brow at Grayson, a look of absolute determination taking over her features.

“*I’m* going to go the highest,” Keegan says proudly from the swing next to Grayson.

I laugh, miming rolling up my sleeves. “Well, hang on then. We’re setting records here today, friends.”

The delighted laughter and screams coming from them as I launch these little thrill-seekers into the air has my smile growing even wider. I fucking love this job.

Dan chuckles as he takes over pushing Keegan for me. “So, how did it go?”

I nod as I push Matilda and Grayson again, my smile dimming. “It was alright.”

“Just alright?” Dan looks at me with surprise. “I figured you’d be showing up to work with a busted face and a thousand-watt smile after Ty finally got back in the ring.”

“That’s coming.” I wink at him and force my smile back into place. “We’re starting slow. Can’t rush these things.”

“That’s smart.” Dan nods as he pushes Keegan higher, and he squeals with joy.

“Higher, Mr. Mitchell!” Matilda yells at me, and I laugh.

“Ok.” I rub my hands together and move behind her as she giggles. “Hang on tight.”

As I deliver the most epic push to send Matilda higher than her competitors, my mind wanders to the weekend and I try to push the worry away. The worry that has been lingering ever since Ty dodged that first

punch. We've made progress, and I think he's feeling better about it after more body sparring yesterday, but… we *are* in a time crunch. While I have no doubt Ty will get it back, I can't help but worry it won't be in time. What if he misses this fight? What is that going to mean for LFA? And when we find out our opponents this week for Dallas, is that going to help or cause more stress?

Hold up.

We're talking about asshole Ty Roscoe, who is anything but fragile. He's the King of the fucking Jungle, and we're going to the motherfucking LFA.

But that still doesn't sound quite right…

As I give Matilda another push, I turn to Dan. "Who's the King of the Jungle?"

He turns his head to me, brows drawn in confusion. "The lion?"

My head tips back with a sigh. "Of course, that's right. I knew that."

Which actually isn't even true, so my confusion is completely justified. Lions live in the savanna, and tigers live in the rainfor–

My logical reasoning is cut short by my phone buzzing in my pocket. But as I pull it out and my eyes skirt over the text, I'd rather be launched into the savanna, right into a lion's mouth.

MOM

Luca, you can't keep us at a distance forever. We are just looking out for you and want to support you. It's time we finally have a conversation about the opportunities available to you and what your long-term plan is. It's been long enough.

"Luca?"

I look up from my phone to Dan, as he eyes me with concern.

"Huh?" I ask, shoving my phone back in my pocket and giving Matilda the saddest excuse for a push. Damnit, I'm better than that.

"Everything ok?" Dan asks. "I was asking if you're coming to hockey this week, but it looks like someone just kicked your puppy."

"Oh." I nod, giving a redeeming push to both Grayson and Matilda at the same time, earning some excited screeches. "Yeah, I am. Sorry about that."

"All good?" Dan asks again, as I'm clearly not doing a good enough job shrugging off the dark cloud my mother effortlessly cast my way.

“Yeah.” I nod and slap a smile on, but Dan just cocks an eyebrow. With a sigh and a huff, I turn to face him, getting closer so I can lower my voice. “Remember when I left my family on Christmas Eve to come back here to my rival turned fu–… fun… buddy turned lover?”

Dan chuckles. “Yeah.”

“Well, my parents are still very upset about that. Not that I’ve really spoken to them much about it… but they’re still trying to convince me we need to talk about my *opportunities* at a boring private school and my *long-term plan.*” I roll my eyes with a sigh and move back into my spot behind the kids as they voice their displeasure about me slacking on my duties.

Dan scoffs. “You’re twenty-six, successful, have your own goals and a plan to achieve them, and it’s been over two months since you sent them a pretty clear message about what you want.” He shakes his head with a huff. “I’d say it’s past time for them to let go a bit.”

My hands drop to my sides as I stare back at him, amazed by his wisdom. “Can you come with me, and repeat that, word for word?”

Dan laughs as he gives Keegan another push. “No. But you can say that.”

I sigh, knowing this is true. But also knowing they’d never listen. “Yeah.” I push Grayson and give my head a shake. “But that’s a problem for another day. On to much more important topics. Did you guys win on Thursday?”

A smile spreads on Dan’s face as he nods. “You know we did.”

As he fills me in on the game, his happiness and excitement pushes my darkness aside and we end up talking all things hockey for the rest of recess while continuing to meet the demands of Grayson, Keegan and Matilda. And as I head back into the school to get the gym ready for my next class, I feel much better.

Until my phone buzzes again.

And as much as I’d like to avoid it, I know I can’t. Reluctantly, I pull it out, ready for a scolding from Mom about how I need to be a good little son and accept their ‘help’.

MOM

Dad and I are coming to St. Louis next month for the Medical Education Conference. We're looking forward to seeing you, and would love to meet this boy that's become so important to you. Let's go for dinner, and we can finally have a good talk about everything so we can meet each other partway. We just want the best for you, and we would hate to see you throw away some wonderful opportunities only to regret it later on.

Well, fuck.

That almost sounds sincere. Looks like they're trying a new approach.

But she does have one thing right. I can't keep putting this off. I need to make them see that this is my life, my choice, and they don't have a say.

Dan said it best… it's time for them to let go.

And soon, they are going to be here… in *my* happy place. Infiltrating my peace and attempting to break down what I've built for myself.

I'm going to need to stop at the store tonight. I've got some serious baking to do.

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NINE

THE DELICIOUS SMELL of freshly baked peanut butter chocolate chip cookies fills my Jeep, and I kick myself for not trying one fresh out of the oven. But I can be patient and try them with everyone else when I get to the gym… I think…

As I pull into the gym parking lot, I eye them on the passenger seat, looking and smelling like fucking perfection. And now I'm torn. I *was* thinking I'd wait for Ty before going in, since he'll be here any moment now. But sitting here with these beauties is going to be a problem.

Fuck it. The cookies win.

Just as I grab them and hop out of my Jeep, ready to head inside and chow down, Ty pulls into the parking lot.

Oh, bittersweet torture.

But that torture turns a little sweeter as he gets out of his car and reaches into the back seat to retrieve his bag, giving me a perfect view of his ass in his grease-stained work pants.

He slings his bag over his shoulder as he walks my way, eyeing me curiously. "You're just getting here?"

"Yeah," I nod, "had a little date with the oven."

His eyes drop to the plate of cookies in my hand, then back up to meet mine with a questioning look.

"Celebration cookies to welcome you back to the ring." I lift the plate with a smile. "I gave you your treat this weekend, but you can't exactly share that with everyone else, you know?" When he doesn't react, I narrow my eyes at him. "You do know that, right? We *are* the single treat type."

Ty just stares back at me, his brows drawing together. “What?”

I shrug as it doesn’t really matter since I know I’m right, and hold the plate out to him. “Cookie?”

He huffs out a breath with a shake of his head, pushing past me towards the gym entrance. With a chuckle, I fall into step beside him. Yeah, I entered stress-bake mode today, but it did what I needed it to. Dallas is in five weeks, and that’s where my focus needs to be. I baked out all the stress, and I won’t be filling mine, or Ty’s, head with any of my parents' bullshit. I’ll deal with them when we win this fight.

“Oh yes, thank you.” I nod. “I *did* have a nice day. Played some Mr. Wolf, set up some epic obstacle courses, flexed my swing pushing muscles…”

“Sounds difficult,” Ty mutters.

“Tyler.” I shake my head. “Remember that fun we talked about, and have been working so hard on getting you to understand? *That’s* what I had today. Work shouldn’t be *difficult*, you should enjoy what you do.” I turn to face him as we reach the gym entrance. “Why, was your day difficult?”

“No.” He side steps around me to reach for the door.

“Wow.” I hold my hand up. “Reel it in. I can only take in so much information at one time.”

Ty lets out a large sigh and turns to face me. And I can’t help but smile at the exasperated expression on his face.

“Gotta climb those stairs, Tiger.”

As his eyes flick between mine, the hardness morphs into something he’s been showing a lot more of recently. Vulnerability.

I know letting someone into his world is difficult and completely foreign to him. He’s a grumpy asshole with sky-high walls, and I don’t expect that to change much. I fell in love with him, just as he is. But now he’s *my* grumpy asshole, and when the walls do come down, I love being able to show him how to experience and enjoy life outside of his head.

He nods slightly and shifts his bag on his shoulder. “My day was good.”

I press my lips together with a smile, trying not to push my luck here. It may not be much, but he tried. And that’s a win.

“Good.” I nod. “Now let’s go in. You’re keeping me from enjoying these cookies and I might *die* if I don’t eat one soon.”

The glare Ty aims my way as I push past him to open the door could burn a hole in the back of my head.

“You might *die* for another reason,” Ty mutters as he enters the gym behind me.

“Oh, come on.” I roll my eyes and head towards the kitchen, where I hear the voices of our teammates. “We both know you wouldn’t. Who else is going to put up with your attitude *and* let you get balls deep in their ass?”

“*My* attitude?” Ty scoffs. “And right now I’m tempted to go balls deep in your throat so you’ll shut the fuck–”

“Hey, guys.” Max pulls his office door shut behind him as he exits, glancing between us with a look of both amusement and horror. “Sorry to… interrupt.”

I wave a hand in the air. “Oh, no problem. Heading out?”

Max huffs a laugh and nods. “Yeah. Just running some errands, I’ll be back later. What are you working on tonight?”

Ty opens his mouth to answer, but I lift my finger and press it to his lips. “No,” I say with a shake of my head.

If he had a fiery glare before, it’s nothing compared to the inferno brewing in his dark eyes now. He smacks my hand away, practically snarling at me.

I chuckle and turn to Max as he observes us cautiously. “We’re grappling today.”

The inferno is now raging as Ty tenses beside me. “No, we’re–”

My head tilts back as I let out a groan. “My *god*.” I point my finger at him. “*You* need a mental break, and *I* need to work on sweeps. You put me in charge, remember?”

“I didn’t fucking put you in charge,” Ty grits out.

“Well, that’s not how I remember it. But either way, I am.” I nod at him. “And I say it’s time to let go. So, what do you say, Ty… can you?”

His jaw tics, and my lips tilt up in a smirk. After everything we’ve been through, pissing him off is still just so much fun.

But truthfully, we both need this. I need to work on sweeps, as I struggle to execute them effectively, and Ty could use a confidence boost. With Ty’s help I’ve been able to strengthen my guard passing, so now I want to focus on reversing position from guard in an effective sweep. And I’m going to try really fucking hard to let Ty have this one, and teach me what I need to know… *really* fucking hard.

As Ty continues to scowl at me, Max chuckles. “Sounds like a good plan.” He walks past us towards the gym door, patting my shoulder on the

way. “I’ll check in when I’m back.”

“Have fun!” I call to him as he leaves, and I head towards the kitchen.

“I want to get into the ring tonight too,” Ty grumbles behind me. “We don’t have a lot of time and–”

I scoff and glance at him over my shoulder as we approach the kitchen. “What part of ‘let go’ do you *still* not understand?”

He sighs and continues towards the locker room, but I grab him, pulling him into the kitchen with me. Inside, everyone is gathered around the kitchen table as they catch up over pre-workout shakes.

“Oh my god.” Seb stares at the plate in my hands. “Are those cookies?!”

“Yup.” I set the plate down on the table to a round of cheers. “Peanut butter chocolate chip.”

Adão chuckles as he grabs one off the plate. “Just don’t be bringing in more treats as we get closer to fight time. I don’t want to be cutting more weight than I need to.”

Well, damn. I may need to find a new coping strategy.

Ty awkwardly shifts on his feet beside me, glancing out into the gym. I can feel the anxiety and anticipation radiating off him, but an elbow to the ribs puts his scowl back in place.

I chuckle, grabbing a cookie, finally, and take a seat at the table.

“So, just a couple days until we find out who we’ll be fighting in Dallas.” Elijah smiles as he leans back in his chair. “Any guesses on your opponents?”

My eyes slide to Ty as he visibly shifts his attention to everyone at the table.

“I’m pretty sure I know who I’ll be fighting,” Rosa says, carefully eyeing the plate of cookies as she finishes her last bite. “Teresa Byers fights out of Innovate MMA in Phoenix and she’s also a flyweight on the road to qualifying for LFA. So, there’s a good chance she’ll be headed to Dallas.”

Elijah lets out a low whistle. “I’ve seen her before. She’s a gnarly striker. No wonder you’ve been going hard on the bags.”

Rosa smiles and shifts her gaze to Ty. “Yeah, but that doesn’t really matter. Us grapplers have a way of getting what we want in a fight.”

Ty’s lips quirk up in a small smile and he gives her a little nod.

“That may be so,” I say, finishing off my cookie. “But you grapplers use up all your energy in a constant struggle for an advantageous position,

while us strikers pace ourselves and control the tempo. Make it last long enough, and a striker is coming out on top."

Seb holds out a fist for me to bump, which I do with a smirk aimed at Ty.

Ty rolls his eyes at me and turns to exit the kitchen. "I'm going to get changed. Hurry up."

I chuckle as he leaves, grabbing another cookie as I push my chair back. But Noah's hand on my arm stops me.

He glances towards the kitchen door. "How's he doing?"

All eyes land on me, and as I look around the table, I smile. Everyone knows Ty won't want them to ask about his progress, and no one has. But they care, and they want to support him in whatever way they can.

"He's looking good." I nod. "He'll be back before we know it."

"Awesome." Adão smiles. "Never doubted it for a second."

I wink at him as I take a bite of my cookie and grab my bag from the floor. "But I better go get changed before he has a stroke."

As I head out of the kitchen and into the locker room, I push down the worry from earlier today and remind myself that despite this tight timeline, we're fucking doing this.

Ty is at his locker, in just his fight shorts as he puts his clothes away. My eyes sweep over the muscles of his back and down to his ass in his black shorts. *Mm.*

He doesn't turn to face me, so I chuckle to myself and quietly remove my sweatpants and hoodie, tossing them in my locker. But when I turn around, he's leaning against his locker with his arms crossed, watching me.

"Like what you see?" I ask, shaking my ass in my favorite teal shorts.

His eyes stay fixed on mine for a moment before he pushes off his locker and crosses the room to stand before me. His hand lifts, and his fingers lightly trace the moon and stars tattoo on my ribs.

"You're fucking annoying," he murmurs as his eyes drop to the tattoo.

A small smile finds its way to my lips, but I stay quiet as I let him share his feelings and take what he needs, in the only way he knows how.

Tigers can't purr, but they show their feelings of comfort and safety through their actions.

His eyes lift to meet mine again and he holds my gaze for one more beat, before he steps back and heads out into the gym.

Such a romantic.

I follow him out to the mats and stand beside him with my hands on my hips. “So, what’s the plan?”

His eyes snap to mine, and any softness that was present immediately disappears. “You want to work on sweeps. What’s *your* plan?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “My plan is to work on sweeps? Now you expand on that plan. Isn’t that what we do?”

He stares at me for a moment as his hands form fists at his sides, then he sighs and closes his eyes. When he opens them, he motions for me to get down on the mat. “You’re weakest in setting them up. We’ll work on hip bump, scissor, butterfly and pendulum sweeps. You’re usually in a scramble when trying for a sweep, and the mechanics of these easily translate anywhere.”

“Um, wow. Rude.” I hold up my hand with a scoff. “Also, most sweeps come out of a scramble. Hence, the need to *sweep*.”

“Most of yours do.” He nods, and I narrow my eyes at him. “But if you want to control the fight, like you *strikers* apparently do, you need to think ahead and plan a sweep. If you fight with a plan you won’t need to be in a scramble and can put your opponent in the position *you* want them in so you can move out of defense and attack.”

I groan, rolling my head back. “Here we go again.”

Ty shrugs. “Fine.”

As he turns to leave, I sigh loudly and dramatically drop my hands to my sides. “Ok, ok.”

Ty stops and turns to face me, crossing his arms.

Waiting.

“Oh, fuck you,” I say, crossing my arms as well.

But he simply stares back at me. And now *I* want to walk away.

But I can’t. Because as much as it pains me to admit… he’s fucking right.

“Ok, yeah.” I throw my hands up in defeat. “I *scramble.* Whatever. A lot of fighters do, so…” I sigh and gesture to the mats, “let’s hip bump.”

Ty shoots me a look as he walks to the mat. “Scissor.”

“Hm,” I shake my head as I drop to my knees, “doesn’t quite work for our mechanics, does it?”

He rolls his eyes with a sigh as he lowers himself to the mat and pushes me onto my back. “You’re fucking insufferable.”

“Oh, that’s a step up from annoying. This just keeps getting better.” I smile up at him as I wrap my legs around his waist, putting us into closed guard position.

“Stop two posts on one side, then–” he starts, but I wave him off.

“Yeah, yeah, I know how to do a scissor sweep.”

The embers in his eyes light once again as he glares down at me. But he gathers himself with an exhale and shakes his head slightly. “Alright then. Show me.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes, as it’s not like I’m a beginner at grappling. Far from it. He does *not* need to walk me through a simple fucking scissor sweep.

So, sure. I’ll fucking show him.

Immediately, I go for a two-on-one grip on his left arm to isolate that post, grabbing his upper arm with one hand and his lower arm with the other. Gotcha, motherfucker.

But the *second* I open my legs, he’s moving.

He drops his left forearm onto the mat, my grip doing nothing to stop him. I have no idea what he’s doing, and it actually seems like he may have just made this easier for me. My left leg drops to his knee, and I push off the mat to roll him onto his back. But he brings his outside foot to the mat, stopping the roll and pushing back against me. And suddenly he’s popping up onto his knees before I can even shift my weight, and he has full control of my arm.

He pauses, looking down at me as I shoot daggers up at him.

“Would you prefer an armbar or to continue in defense against side control?”

I pull my arm out of his grip and sit up on the mat. “You’re an asshole.”

He huffs and shakes his head. “You said you could do it.”

“I *can*,” I snap at him. I motion for him to get back into position. “Again.”

As he settles between my legs, bringing us back into closed guard, he meets my eyes and tilts his head.

“What,” I sigh.

“I can help you if you can get over yourself for a minute.”

Fuck. How easy it is to fall back into rival territory with this fucker.

I swallow down my pride and remind myself why we’re doing this in the first place. So he *can* help me with this, and so he can get out of his

head.

I open my hands wide in a welcoming gesture and slap on a smile. “Do tell, oh wise one.”

He grabs my arm and rolls us over so he’s now on the bottom.

Can’t say I’m too mad at that idea.

“Something you want to tell me, Ty?” I ask.

“Shut the fuck up and listen,” he snaps, keeping hold of my right arm. “You can do a great white grip.”

I shake my head. “Don’t know what that is.”

“That’s why I’m going to show you.”

He keeps his grasp on my forearm and pulls it down to his chest, snaking his left arm through the outside so the crook of his elbow is against mine. He then grasps my elbow with his other hand so he has my forearm completely locked against his chest.

“Ok…” I murmur, unsure how the fuck I’ll be getting out of this one.

He then pushes off the mat onto his hip, putting his right knee into my sternum and his left leg down to sweep my knees and roll me over.

And there’s absolutely nothing I can do to stop it.

Ty effortlessly rolls on top of me, keeping my arm in his grip.

But apparently this doesn’t end with just a sweep. He smirks down at me, then pops up onto his feet over my hips. And *fuck*… I have a bad feeling about this.

His left foot moves up beside my head as he rotates my arm in a direction it does *not* want to go… in a fucking double joint armlock.

I tap him with a grunt, and he releases me.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask, rubbing my elbow.

He sits beside me, running a hand through his hair. “If you keep the great white grip through the sweep, there’s a few things you can do with it. A modified kimura is one of them.”

I stare back at him for a moment before I shake my head in disbelief at how fucking cool that move was. “Fuck… I can’t even be mad about that.”

Ty moves onto his knees and motions for me to lie down. “So, do it.”

I settle back onto the mat and wrap my legs around his waist, hiding my smile as I take in the confidence and determination in him.

He may be an asshole, and I may be ‘*annoying*’… but my plan worked.

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TEN

THE BURN in my muscles is a welcome distraction from the thoughts swirling around in my head as I finish the last of my shoulder presses. With an exhale, I head over to the weight rack to swap out my dumbbells to start on bicep curls.

"Stop right now, thank you very much."

I look over my shoulder towards Luca as he sings along, terribly, to a song playing in his earbuds. He's doing some kind of weird dance, holding his hands up in front of him and then pointing over his shoulder with his thumbs. His music is so fucking loud in his earbuds, even I can hear it.

With a roll of my eyes, I turn back to the weight rack. But my eyes linger on Max's closed office door. And those thoughts start swirling again. He's on the phone, right now, finding out who we are fighting in Dallas. And while we are all anxiously waiting for him to let us know, I think I'm more anxious than anyone.

And I don't get it.

Luca and I did more body sparring yesterday, after grappling with him the day before. It felt good, and there were times I thought I could have effectively blocked a head shot. But something stopped me from asking him to do that. I know I've made progress… but it's fucking frustrating. I feel weak. I shouldn't be this scared over something I have been doing for ten years, and something I am *made* to do.

As I finally tear my eyes away from Max's door, I let out a large sigh. Regardless, I need to know who I'll be facing. I need to prepare as best I can, especially now that I'm in this fucked up state of anxiety, fear and

uncertainty. But once I can dive deep into my opponent, know his fight style, strengths, and weaknesses, I can train with purpose and focus my head. I just need to–

"Dude, chill."

Luca is standing beside me at the weight rack, one eyebrow cocked as he watches me.

I ignore him, pulling my weights off the rack and backing up so I can start my curls.

But he continues to watch me, and a sly smirk slides onto his lips. "Aw. This is fun. I now have a front-row seat to see just how antsy you were when waiting to find out you were fighting me."

I scoff, starting in on my reps. "More like disappointed about an easy fight."

Luca rolls his eyes. "Right. Is that why our records were basically identical? And oh, wait… also why we are both here?"

I shoot him a look as I continue my reps, biting my tongue on the argument that I won our last fight. No sense in opening all that up again.

But he just continues to smirk at me, stepping closer. My gaze shifts over his shoulder to the mirror on the wall as I try my best to ignore him. Which is difficult as he moves into my space and brings his lips to my neck, running his tongue up to my ear.

"I know how to get you to relax," he murmurs.

As his hand cups my cock over my shorts, I pause my movements and exhale. My eyes meet his, then drop to his mouth as he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

"Uh, I'm *right* here."

Luca turns to look at Elijah with a laugh as I lift my weight to his chest to push him away from me.

"Sorry, Elijah," Luca says as he rubs his chest. "But when the urge rises, and it's right there…" He looks down at my dick and lifts his eyebrows.

Elijah chuckles from his seat on the workout bench, and I roll my eyes at Luca before returning to my reps. As they start talking, I tune them out and take one more quick glance at Max's door. How much longer is this going to take?

To keep from crawling out of my skin with anticipation, I bring my focus back to my task, counting the remaining few reps of this round. Six, seven, eight…

“Ty?”

My eyes find Elijah as he looks up at me from the bench, waiting.

“What?” I ask, glancing between him and Luca.

“We’re going to head to dinner at a pub down the road, after we meet with Max. You guys in?” Elijah asks with a smile.

I lift my gaze to Luca behind him as he smirks and crosses his arms.

My grip tightens on the weight in my hand as I stare back at him. Obviously he wants to go, but he’s playing his stupid game and getting me to climb the fucking stairs or whatever. He wants me to make this decision, and for me to say yes. And just for that, I should say no.

But as I turn my attention back to Elijah, and he looks up at me hopefully, I find that initial *no* I’ve always had for such invitations isn’t immediately rushing to the surface. The hesitation is still there, and those feelings of *why bother*… but there’s something keeping me from immediately backing out of this.

Luca chuckles, putting a hand on Elijah’s shoulder. “Yeah, we’re in,” he says, smiling widely at me. Then he holds up his fingers in a crawling motion, like they’re climbing stairs.

But before I can say or do anything, Max’s door opens. I watch as he walks into the gym, waving to everyone to join him.

As I put my weights back, my heart thunders and I curse to myself. I’ve never felt like this with anything MMA related. This feeling of… I don’t even know what. Unknown? And to feel like this over something as simple as finding out who I’ll be fighting is just fucked. Granted, my opponent has mostly been Luca up until this point, and he brought on feelings of anger more than anything else, but still.

Everyone gathers around the boxing ring as Max taps on his phone, excited murmurs filling the space. Luca leans against the ring post, smiling at Rosa as she dangles her legs over the edge of the ring floor, resting her arms over the bottom rope.

“Here we go.” Seb rubs his hands together as he stands beside me. “Fucking pumped.” He smiles at me, and I force a smile back at him.

“Alright.” Max looks up from his phone. “Rosa, you’re facing Teresa Byers.”

“Knew it,” Rosa says with a nod.

Max chuckles. “Guess I don’t need to fill you in on her?”

Rosa shakes her head. “We were bound to meet at some point soon, I’ve been keeping an eye on her.”

Max nods approvingly and lowers his eyes to his phone again. “Adão. You have Roman Haney. Solid, all-around fighter.” He looks up at him. “Looks like he could be a challenge.”

Adão smiles with a shrug. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s the spirit,” Max laughs. “Luca.”

My eyes slide to Luca, and I take in the excitement written all over his face. His eyes are bright, and his smile is wide. And I feel a pang of guilt. He *should* be excited… and I should be too. I can’t help but feel like I’ve been bringing him down with me.

“Manuel Rojas.” Max looks up at Luca, then smiles. “Striker.”

“Fuck yeah.” Luca’s smile grows even bigger. “I’ve heard of him. This should be fun.”

I’ve heard of him too. He’s fast and tends to use a defensive fight to his advantage. He’s quite similar to Luca in some ways, and the complete opposite in others. Which should make for a really interesting fight.

“And Ty.”

My eyes snap to Max, and he looks up from his phone at me.

“Andrew Giles. He fights out of the same gym as Roman Haney, so he has a similar fighting style. But, from what I’ve seen, he tends to prefer a stand-up fight.”

I nod, crossing my arms over my chest. “Got it.”

The corner of Max’s lips tilt up as he nods back at me. “I know you do.”

As he turns to Noah, I feel Luca’s eyes on me. But I don’t look back at him. Because I don’t want to show him the weird mix of emotions rolling through me right now. It’s excitement and need, but also hesitation, sadness, and frustration. I need this fight, more than anything. I need to get back into what makes me *me.* But this massive block is in my way, and it just won’t come down no matter how much I chip away at it.

I have just over four weeks. Four weeks to get over this. Four weeks to take a hit, sharpen my defense, strengthen my attacks, work on my balance–

“Alright.” Max’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. “I’ll be meeting with each of you over the next week to work on your training plans. You all know what to do until then.”

“Got it, boss.” Elijah nods to him as he hops down from the ring, and Rosa jumps onto his back with a laugh.

I watch as everyone makes their way towards the locker room, and Max heads to his office. But I can't make myself move.

Luca turns to face me when he realizes I'm not following and points a finger at me. "No."

I open my mouth to respond but he continues. "I said no. We're going out. Come on." He pats his thigh. "Let's go."

My eyes narrow at him. "I'm not a fucking dog."

"Oh, right." He holds out his hand and rubs his fingers and thumb together. "Psst psst psst, here kitty kitty."

"Fuck off, Mitchell." I turn towards the glove locker, an intense need to train taking over me. "I'll come out next time."

Luca scoffs. "Right. I'm sure."

Just as I reach the glove locker and pull the door open, Luca's hand slams it shut. I turn to shoot him a look, and he just tilts his head with an eyebrow cocked.

And as I look into his eyes and take in the questions swirling around in them, the need to shove him away dissipates. Because I know, in his own, frustrating way… he wants to help.

"Just…" I sigh, "let me have this one."

His eyes soften as understanding passes through them, and he gives me a small nod. I know why he pushes me, and as frustrating as that can be… I need it. I know I'm not easy to love. And I don't know how to let him in. But I want to, and I appreciate that he continues to bang down the doors that I've hidden behind for so long.

And most of all, I appreciate that he also lets me close some when I need to.

"Drills or spar?" Luca asks, pulling the locker door open again.

"You don't have to stay," I say, taking out a pair of wraps.

"Oh, trust me, I know I don't." He takes a pair of wraps out as well and unrolls them.

I sigh, wondering if it would, in fact, be better if he left. As much as I could use a spar, the bags will do just fine and don't talk back.

"But I'm going to," Luca continues, wrapping his hand. "Because I want to."

I lift my eyes to him, and a soft smile tugs at my lips.

For a second.

"But you owe me an epic fucking dinner out this weekend."

I wince, looking down at my hands. “Maybe you should go then.”

Luca laughs, reaching into the locker and grabbing his gloves. “Oh, Ty. Such a comedian.” He then nods thoughtfully as he pulls his gloves on. “Or maybe I’ll make you cook for me. Hm, now I’m torn. Do you cook? Like, actual food? I’ve only ever seen you make boring-ass protein meals.”

I furrow my brow at him as I pull my gloves on.

He just shrugs. “I bet you can cook.”

As he turns and makes his way to the boxing ring, talking about table flower arrangements, I can’t help but let out a small chuckle.

He’s a fucking idiot.

But he’s my fucking idiot.

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ELEVEN

LUCA'S BREATH is warm on my cheek, his arm draped over my chest and his leg wrapped around mine. He's sound asleep, and there's an entire fucking bed on the other side of him as I teeter on the edge of the mattress.

I attempt to slide out from underneath him to get out of bed, but as soon as I sit up, his hand wraps around my arm.

"No," he mumbles sleepily. "Not yet."

I sigh, tapping my phone screen on the bedside table. 6:25 AM.

"Your alarm will be going off in five minutes." I try to pull my arm out of his grasp, but he just grips me tighter. As I look over my shoulder at him, I'm met with sleepy hazel eyes.

"So, five more minutes to sleep." He tries to pull me back down beside him, but I don't move. His eyes narrow at me, neither one of us willing to budge. "When tigers sleep, they lie together and wrap their paws around each other."

"Good for them," I say as I turn away from him again, trying once more to get up and start getting ready for work. But he doesn't let go. With a sigh, I look back at him again. "I'm not hugging you while you sleep for an extra minute."

Luca scoffs. "It's called *cuddling*. And not *a* minute… five."

"More like four now."

"Exactly, you're wasting time. Now lie the fuck down."

My arm remains in his death grip as I stare back at him. And as his lips tilt up in a smile, I sigh. Sometimes, with him, it's easier to just give in and get it over with.

He successfully pulls me back down to the bed, and I nudge him in the ribs with my elbow. “At least move over. You’re taking up the entire fucking bed.”

Luca moves over, pulling me with him and nuzzling into me like a touch-starved puppy as he wraps his tattooed arm and leg around me again.

And as I lie on my back with his head on my chest, I stare up at the ceiling and try my hardest to fight the urge to push him off me.

He snorts out a laugh. “Wow. You’re fucking awkward.”

My jaw clenches as that urge grows.

“Remember what I said about the tiger’s paws?” He pokes at my arm that he’s lying on, and with a large exhale, I wrap my arm around his back.

“You’re really pushing it,” I mutter.

“And you’re not.” Luca tips his head back to look up at me. “I’m not usually one to complain when you’re stiff, but this just isn’t it, Ty. I might as well be cuddling a statue covered in thorns. Like a cactus statue. Because let’s face it, there’s not too much about you that’s *rosy*.” He snorts out a laugh, apparently pleased with that joke.

“Well then, we don’t need to be doing this.”

I start to push myself up again, but his hand lands on my chest, pushing me back down. “Yes. We do.”

My eyes close as I take in a deep breath, exhaling slowly to keep my shit together. Just another minute…

And when Luca’s alarm finally goes off, an annoying upbeat pop song blaring throughout the room, I throw the blankets back and get out of bed faster than I think I ever have before.

Luca chuckles as he rolls over to turn his alarm off, humming “Gonna Fly Now” from *Rocky*.

Ignoring him, I head into Luca’s bathroom and start up the shower. And as I step under the warm spray, I let it wash away the nagging thoughts that have been swirling around in my brain since yesterday.

Andrew Giles prefers a stand-up fight.

A striking fight.

And during drills with Luca last night, after everyone left, I flinched at a fucking *feint* from him. I knew he wasn’t going to hit me, and I still fucking flinched.

I scrub my hands over my face, pushing those thoughts from my mind for now as I focus on the day ahead. It's going to be busy at the garage, so I can worry about this bullshit tonight at the gym.

Just as I finish rinsing the shampoo from my hair, Luca pulls the shower curtain back and steps in, handing me a cup of coffee. I take it as I get out of the shower, and his eyes drop to my dick.

"Damn," he groans. "That would be a good breakfast."

I grab a towel from the hook and rub it over my hair. "Could have had it if you didn't waste time cuddling."

He gives me a hard look as his hand tightly grips the shower curtain. "Cuddling is never wasted time." His eyes drop to my cock once more as I dry myself off and wrap the towel around my waist. "But we're fucking hard tonight."

"Fine by me," I mutter as I turn to the sink and take a sip of my coffee.

As Luca pulls the shower curtain closed, singing something about having bad blood, my eyes reluctantly slide up to meet my hazy reflection in the foggy mirror.

My whole life, it's been hard to look into my own eyes. To see emptiness, hatred, guilt, anger… and a complete stranger staring back at me. But over the past few months with Luca, I've seen the guy in the mirror wake up, and slowly let go of everything that has controlled him. And I've come to know and appreciate who he really is.

But right now, I'm thankful I can't see my eyes. Because I feel like I'm just one more failure away from losing it all. And I'm not ready for the emptiness to return just yet.

I grab my coffee and head into the bedroom to get dressed. But I groan as I toss yesterday's gym shirt back into my bag. I forgot to bring another fucking shirt and pair of boxers from home.

"Grab one of mine," Luca says as he enters the bedroom naked, running a towel through his wet curls.

He tosses me a pair of boxers, and I pull them on then open his closet to grab a shirt. But as my eyes rake over the fucking rainbow in here, I wince. I'd rather wear my rumpled, sweaty gym shirt.

Luca chuckles as he joins me at the closet, reaching in to pull out a pale pink and purple hoodie, holding it up to me as he tilts his head in assessment.

“Fuck no.” I push him away from me, and he just shrugs with a smile, pulling the hoodie on over his t-shirt.

“You could leave some clothes here, you know,” he says, pulling on a pair of light blue track pants. “You’re here more than your place anyway.”

My eyes meet his as they sparkle with amusement, and I don’t miss the way my heart picks up its pace a bit at that thought. But all I do is nod. “Yeah.”

His lips tilt up in a lopsided smile before he heads out to the kitchen. “I’ll make breakfast,” he calls back to me.

I grab a dark blue sweater from the closet, surprised to see something so normal in here. Except, of course, there are pastel stripes in almost every fucking color across the front of it.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter to myself as I pull it on anyway. It’s just until I get to the garage and can change into my work shirt.

As I make my way into the kitchen, Luca is at the stove pouring eggs into a pan.

“It’s gymnastics day today in Phys. Ed. Which means there are crash mats.” He looks over his shoulder at me with a knowing look. “And the kids will be fucking *feral* about it. I need all the energy I can get today, so if I can’t have dick, another source of protein will have to do.”

I huff out a laugh as I lean against the counter, watching as he stirs the eggs in the pan. And as he continues to yap about crash mats and impulse control – which is fucking ironic since it’s something he knows nothing about – my mind wanders once again to last night.

Andrew Giles. Flinching. Luca’s opponent, Manuel Rojas. Training plans.

Guilt.

“So,” I cross my arms, taking advantage of the pause in Luca’s outspoken thoughts, “what’s your plan for tonight? Sounds like you need more sparring time in the ring.”

He waves his hand dismissively in the air as he butters toast. “Yeah, I’ll figure out a plan this weekend.”

I sigh, the guilt settling in deeper. He should already have his plan and know exactly what it is he needs to focus on. And while I know he’s a strong striker as is, he’s facing another fighter whose strength is Muay Thai. He needs to drill and spar to sharpen his defense and be ready for whatever

his opponent throws at him. And I should be able to support him with that, like he is supporting me.

"I… can't give you what you need right now," I say, watching as he scoops the eggs onto two plates.

Luca turns his head to me, eyebrows drawing together slightly. He holds my gaze for a moment before setting the pan back on the stove and turning to face me, crossing his arms as well. "We've had this talk. Need I remind you about the d-holes?"

I shake my head. "And what about you?"

He shrugs. "I'm also fucking up d-holes. I thought we established that."

Another sigh escapes me as he smiles. But, as frustrating as his optimism is, it's once again igniting determination deep within me. Because not only do I really need this… I don't want to let him down.

"We're moving out of body sparring and drills with feints tonight," I say. "It's been a week. I'm ready."

Luca nods, his smile growing wider. "If you say so."

"I do." I nod back at him.

He crosses the kitchen to stand before me, placing his hands on the counter on either side of me. "We still have work to do in the cuddle department, but I'm glad you're still a stubborn asshole in some ways. Because you know what they say…" He leans in, his lips brushing over mine. "A tiger can't change his stripes."

"So, it was only three minor injuries all day, which isn't too bad. But I called it, they were all because of the crash mat."

I huff out a laugh as I toss my clothes in my locker. No way in hell would I ever be able to do Luca's job. Sounds like a nightmare, wrangling a bunch of kids in a wide-open gym, all while trying to teach them something? Fucking impossible.

"But the balance beam went surprisingly well," he says thoughtfully as he pulls his shirt off. "I thought for sure we'd have some hard-core tumbles from that one."

I shake my head, pulling out my hand wraps. “Sounds eventful.”

He doesn’t respond, and when I close my locker and turn to face him, he’s looking down at his phone with a furrowed brow. His expression morphs into one of anger for a brief moment, until he sighs and tosses his phone into his locker.

“What?” I ask.

He looks up at me in confusion. “What?”

I point at his phone in his locker.

“Oh.” He grabs his wraps and closes his door. “Nothing to worry your pretty, dark, twisty little head about.”

I watch him as he slides his rainbow headband in place, pushing his curls back from his face. And the defeated look in his eyes can only mean one thing.

“Mitchell drama?” I ask.

He sighs as he meets my gaze. “What else? But, whatever. It’s not worth putting effort into right now. Come on.” With a shake of his head, he walks towards the locker room door, clearly not wanting to talk about it.

As I follow him towards the ring, I take in the sudden shift in his energy. There’s tension in his shoulders, and for probably the first time ever, he doesn’t stop and talk to everyone along the way. I know his parents are a thorn in his side, but I also know he’s been dealing with their absurd demands his whole life. I’m not sure what happened to cause this mood change, but if this is how he wants to handle it right now, then who am I to judge. What do I know about parents anyway?

We climb between the ropes of the ring, and when Luca turns to face me, his usual smile is back in place.

“So, ready to hear your plan for today?” he asks.

I look up at him as I start wrapping my hands. “Aren’t we–”

“Ah.” He shakes his head with a large smile. “Trainer, remember?”

I roll my eyes, bringing my attention back to my wraps.

“You know you can defend most incoming hits with a solid guard,” Luca says while wrapping a hand. “And you need to be able to trust and hold your guard to defend against a hit. Which,” he lifts his eyes and smirks at me, “has always been a weakness of yours.”

My gaze narrows at him as I fasten my wrap. “Fuck off.”

“Only if you join me.” He flashes me a sly grin. “But it’s true. You find your guard, defend the hit, then drop it as you attempt to move the fight

where you want it."

An amused scoff escapes me. "What the fuck else would I do?"

"With an opponent who throws a lot of heavy, overwhelming strikes your way?" Luca points to himself, and I shake my head, blowing out a breath as I finish wrapping my hands.

"You should be holding your guard to avoid hits, while working your way into a position for counterstrikes," he continues. "A heavy striker is going to control distance to stay standing, so instead of dropping your guard to bring the fight to the ground, you can keep your guard and strike back. You know… stay in the moment, and not try to make the fight what *you* want?"

I slide my gloves on and bite my tongue on a response to that. As much as that pisses me off… the fucker has a point. I'm fighting a striker, so I need to think like a striker.

"Fine," I mutter. And when Luca looks up at me with a cocked eyebrow, I grit my teeth. "*Alright.*"

He nods proudly. "Tonight, we'll work in tight and high guard. I'm only going to hit your guard, so you'll get some exposure to safe hits while also holding the guard and getting your position for counterstrikes. Giving one stick to two birds."

"Two birds one stone," I correct him.

His brows draw together. "Huh?"

"The phrase is kill two birds with one stone."

His face twists in horror as he lifts a gloved hand to his chest. "Holy fuck, why would you do that?"

I consider explaining, but decide it's not worth the effort and just shake my head. "Never mind, let's go."

"Remind me never to take you around birds," Luca mutters as he moves into his stance before me.

As I settle into my stance as well, lifting my gloves and pulling them tight towards my face into tight guard, I ignore the shit about birds and think about his plan. And it does sound good. Not only do I need to practice taking hits, but working on my defense so I can create offense against a heavy attacker is definitely another need.

"I'll start with low power and build up," Luca says, tapping his gloves together.

I nod, even though I fucking hate that. *Low power.* I *want* to feel a hit. I want to feel the exhilaration and thrill when his glove makes contact with me, and the urge that flows through me to deliver one right back. But those feelings have shifted, and something inside me is screaming no. And I can't seem to ignore it.

Luca throws a light jab to my forearm, and I use my elbow to parry his strike. He then throws another jab followed by a straight right as I hold my guard to keep him out.

And it feels good.

I give him a nod and he delivers a combo, keeping his strikes light and targeted at my forearms as I parry each one, my confidence stirring.

"Harder," I say, angling my guard towards him as he shifts his weight.

"That's what he said." He smirks over his gloves at me as he bounces on his toes.

I blow out a breath. "Come on, do it."

"He also said that."

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, that too."

I glare at him between my gloves, and he snorts.

"Ok, ok. Here comes the heat."

He lays a straight right-left hook-straight right combo on me, and I feel the weight behind it.

But my feet are steady, my head is clear, and my guard remains.

"More."

Luca smiles, tapping his gloves together. "Fuck yeah."

He continues to throw strikes in various combos, coming on quick and long at times but keeping his power behind the hits low. And with each one, I block, redirect, and position him where I want him.

And right when he shifts his weight, attempting to move to my outside and throw me off, I lower my inside glove and land a hook to his open ribs.

He grunts as he falters in his step, so I lay a jab-straight right-left hook combo on him, getting him in the jaw.

"The fuck." He backs up, lifting a glove to his jaw. "Dude, I don't have a mouthguard in."

I just stare back at him, dropping my gloves to my sides.

And as Luca meets my eyes, he smiles. "Hey there, Tiger."

A small smile forms for me as well, as that did feel good, and it does feel like progress. But… it still doesn't feel like enough. I still need to be able to take a full hit to the head, and time is not on my side.

"I need more," I say. "Getting hit on my guard isn't–"

"Oh my *god*." Luca rolls his eyes and sighs. "Just accept this as a step in the right direction and take at least a couple seconds to celebrate *this* achievement."

A forceful exhale escapes me as I shake my arms out, not willing to admit that he's kind of right. It *is* a step in the right direction. And even though it's slow… it's progress. The more I do this, the more comfortable I'll feel. And, as Luca annoyingly pointed out, spending more time in guard is not a bad thing. I can only benefit from having a well-rounded defensive posture for a heavily pressuring opponent.

And as I look into Luca's eyes, I'm overcome with gratitude for him. That guilt I've been feeling morphs into an intense need to help him as much as he's been helping me.

"A good fighter will find his opponent's weakness, and exploit it," I say.

Luca nods. "Yeah, but it won't be a weakness by the time you step into the cage."

I nod as well. "Your opponent is expecting a striker."

His brow furrows. "Yeah… because I am."

"My opponent is expecting a grappler."

He holds his hands out with a shake of his head. "Are we stating fight facts? There will be an audience, a referee in the cage–"

"You said I drop my defense and try to control the fight," I continue, "which I can't do well with a heavy striker. So, I need to fight with the mindset of a defensive striker. *You* are fighting a striker who uses a defensive fight to his advantage, limiting your opportunities for attack."

A slow smile spreads across his face as realization dawns on him.

"Take him by surprise," I say. "Be a grappler."

Luca chuckles. "Well, here we go again. Now that's how we fuck up some d-holes."

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TWELVE

LUCA

AS THE DOOR to my apartment closes behind me, I drop my bag to the floor and throw my hoodie over a chair. And I take a moment to just bask in this feeling of… relief. We made progress tonight. That fucker is going to be taking hits in no time.

And now I have a plan too. It's always been my goal to become a complete fighter by strengthening my grappling, which is one of the main reasons I wanted to come to this gym. And Ty is right. I'm facing a striker, so it would be easy and expected to go in ready for a stand-up fight. But why not go in thinking more like a grappler. It's his greatest weakness. And it used to be mine.

Until Tyler fucking Roscoe.

I chuckle to myself as I drop onto the couch. What a mind fuck. Just months ago I could barely look at the guy without wanting to punch his perfect teeth in, and now I'm putting my trust in him to alter my training and fight style for a very important fight, with a massive opportunity waiting at the end of it.

My phone buzzes in the pocket of my sweatpants, and I pull it out, confused. Ty went home to grab clothes, since for some reason he doesn't want to borrow any of mine, so there's no way he's here and buzzing into the building yet.

But a smile takes over as my sister's name lights up my screen with a text.

MIA

Hey bud. Just on break at work and checking in… Dad mentioned he tried to get in touch with you today, and you've been quiet recently.

Well, there goes my smile. I was *this* close to forgetting about Dad's text to me this evening.

Get in touch with me? Or ask me when I'm ready to start taking my life seriously and stop shutting them out when they're trying to "help" me? That, along with Mom breathing down my neck to discuss this when they come out here, is not exactly inspiring conversation.

I drop my phone to my chest with a sigh. *Fuck*. No matter how hard I try to just forget all of this and focus on the fight, they keep weaseling their way back in. Even reluctantly agreeing with Mom to talk it all out when they come out here isn't enough, and she keeps trying to send me information on teaching at that god awful private school, Browning. Apparently talking about it means agreeing with her, not hearing me out. Give an inch and she'll take the whole ruler. Or measuring tape… whatever the fuck it is, she has it.

Ugh. Fuck this. I know just what I need right now for some much needed comfort.

The Last Unicorn.

I grab the remote, turn the TV on and quickly find my favorite movie. And as our beautiful hero unicorn appears on the screen, she soothes my frustrated soul.

My phone buzzes again on my chest, and I tear my eyes away from the TV to read Mia's text.

I'm sorry, Luca. I was hoping they would come around to your plan when they saw how successful you can be in MMA. But they still can. And if it's any help, I actually just registered to attend the conference as well. So I'm looking forward to seeing you, and hopefully officially meeting Ty now that you won't be beating each other up in a cage haha

My smile returns as excitement rushes in. Having her here will definitely help lessen the blow, and she's always been an excellent backup when facing my parents.

Best fucking news ever. And can't guarantee a fight with Ty won't still happen, but chances are less now.

Not sure this is a relationship I'll ever understand, but if you're happy, I'm happy lol.

I have to get back to work, but I'll give you a call next week. Love you!

Love you too *heart emoji*

I drop my phone to my chest again and bring my attention back to the movie. A magical unicorn embarking on a quest, facing evil forces to save herself and her kind.

Now that's the strength I need.

I can be as strong as a unicorn.

My phone buzzes, and this time I know it's Ty. I buzz him in, shaking off the whole parent dilemma for now and just let myself get lost in my movie.

A minute later the door opens and Ty enters, looking hot as fuck in black sweatpants, a black hoodie and a black backwards snapback.

His eyes land on me on the couch, then slide to the TV. "What's with you and this unicorn movie?"

"It's a classic, and my favorite movie ever," I say as I let my eyes do one more sweep over him, completely torn between continuing to eye fuck him or returning to my movie. "If you get over yourself long enough to watch it, you'll see."

He shakes his head, huffing out a breath as he heads towards the bedroom to drop off his bag. But he pauses as his eyes land on my bag on the floor and my hoodie over the chair. I smirk as he picks them up and takes them into the bedroom with him.

Control freak.

As the unicorn and the magician finally, and epically, escape the witch, I get up and head to the kitchen. I open the fridge and peer inside, kicking myself for not getting groceries this week.

"What do you want to eat?" I ask as I hear Ty exit the bedroom. It's late, and there's not a whole lot of options in here. It's also Friday, so I wouldn't be opposed to a little weekend kickoff by ordering pizza and having a beer or two. If I can convince the taskmaster to lighten up for a bit.

Ty doesn't answer, and I'm surprised when he comes up behind me and presses his lips to my neck, sliding his hand under my shirt.

I smile, tilting my head as he runs his lips up my neck. Maybe I won't have much convincing to do. But dinner can wait.

As I close the fridge door, Ty turns me to face him. His eyes are brighter than they have been in weeks, and there's a spark in them that I can only assume is hope and excitement. He's getting closer to his old self in the ring… and the closer he gets in there, the freer he is out here.

And that's all I need to see for my own stress to completely evaporate.

Our mouths crash together in a heated kiss, his tongue pushing past my lips as they part for him. Hands roam and lips explore as we lose ourselves in each other, taking this moment to block everything else out and just be here, together.

Ty's lips are still locked on mine, his hands grasping my waist under my shirt as he pushes me against the kitchen counter. And as his fingers slip under the waistband of my sweatpants, my heart fucking riots.

"Fuck," I mutter as his hand wraps around my thickening cock, and his lips move to my neck.

He runs his hand along my length, and mine drops to rub him over his pants, pulling a soft moan from him. And as he continues to jerk me, and probably give me a hickey that I can't even bring myself to care about right now, I notice how much lighter he's feeling. Some of the weight has been lifted tonight after a huge step in the right direction. And while it's still there, and he still has work to do, we're slowly chipping away at it.

Ty steps back, pushing my sweats down as he drops to his knees. And as he takes my hard cock into his grasp again, I bite my lip as I smile down at him.

He looks up at me, and annoyance settles into his features. "What?"

I shrug one shoulder as I place my hands on the counter on either side of me. "It's always a fun time when you suck my cock without a challenge from me to do so."

He rolls his eyes. "Fuck you."

"Soon." I nod, my smile widening.

He pushes my hips back forcefully, so the cupboard door handle digs into my ass. But before I can do anything about that, his mouth is on my cock and all is forgotten.

Pleasure rolls through me as he slides his lips up and down my length, and the sight of him on his knees for me is sending me into overdrive already. His dark eyes lift to meet mine as he takes me deep into his throat,

and my hand finds the back of his head. As I guide him deeper, his eyes narrow. But I just smile.

“Maybe you do need a challenge then,” I say, thrusting my hips slightly and he tenses with a grunt. “What? Can’t take me all the way in?”

He bats my hand away from his head and pushes me back, releasing me from his mouth. His eyes are full of both defiance and desire as he stares up at me, and I just keep smiling at him.

But desire wins.

In a quick motion he grabs my hips and takes me back into his mouth. And before I know it, I’m buried deep in his throat.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan, watching him take me all the way in as he fights the urge to gag. And that’s fucking *hot*.

Ty epically conquers his challenge as he swallows my cock, bringing me closer and closer to the edge with each lick and suck. And as much as I’m enjoying this, I need more.

I need to see just how far I can take this.

I push him off me so he stumbles back and has to catch himself before he falls onto his ass.

“The fuck are you–” he starts with a snarl as he glares at me.

“That was great but it’s time to fuck. Let’s go.”

That shuts him up.

As I head to the bedroom, stripping my shirt off as I go, he follows me. But I suddenly turn around and point a finger at him as he reaches up to grasp his sexy-as-fuck backwards hat on his head.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Don’t I fucking dare what?” he asks, pausing for a moment and then continuing to remove his hat.

I step forward and grab his wrist before he can pull it off his head. “This stays on.”

His brows draw together in confusion. “I need to take my shirt off.”

With a nod, I release his wrist and gesture to his shirt. “Ok, but the hat goes right back on after.”

He gives me a quizzical look as he removes his hat, pulls his shirt off and puts the hat back on his head.

“Good.” I nod in approval before turning to grab the lube out of the bedside table and dropping onto the bed.

And *fuck* me… shirtless Ty with a backwards hat, sweats low on his hips showing the perfect outline of his hard cock beneath them… let's get this party fucking started.

Ty drops his sweatpants and boxers, giving me a view of said perfect cock, and I kick mine off as well. His lips meet mine again as he lowers himself over me on the bed, grinding his dick against mine.

And when he rolls us over, sliding his hand down to my ass, I pull back and grab his wrist.

"What?" he asks.

I smile down at him as I straddle his hips. "You think that's how this is going to go?"

"Yeah," he says, attempting to pull his wrist out of my grasp, "I do."

"Hm." I tighten my grip on him, and his eyes darken. "You know, Ty… you got me thinking." The fingers of my free hand trail down his abs. "About how much you love a challenge. You love to overcome, conquer, and tell failure to fuck right off."

His eyes flick between mine, and he stills beneath me.

"You don't like losing control," I continue, running my fingers over his cock. "But here, with us… you have. And you've liked it."

Ty swallows, his eyes still on mine, and I swear I see intrigue in the depths of his dark gaze.

"So, I have another challenge for you." I lean over, brushing my lips over his. "I challenge you to lose it all. And give it all up to me."

A breath escapes him as I run my lips up his jaw towards his ear.

"I see how your body reacts when I play with your ass," I say in a low voice. "When my finger slides into you, with my mouth on your cock… and I think you'd be lying if you say you haven't thought about what my dick would feel like in your ass."

His free hand lands on my chest to push me back, but I grab that wrist as well and pin both of them to the bed. He stares up at me, but the hardness I expected to find in his eyes isn't there.

I smile. Looks like it's challenge accepted.

"You going to roll over for me, Tiger?" I ask. "Let's see just how much you can unwind."

He forcefully pulls his wrists from my grasp, and I let him. But he pauses for a moment after pushing me off his hips. Our eyes stay locked, and I watch as the fire in him grows. Then, he rolls over.

Holy shit.

My fucking heart.

My hand runs up the back of his leg as I take a moment to compose myself and admire that ass, ready and waiting for me. That ass that I am going to fucking *devour.*

But I can't wait any longer. He gave me the green light, and I'm fucking going for it before he does any takesies-backsies.

I grab his hips and pull him sharply towards me, so he's forced to move onto his knees. He shoots me a dirty look over his shoulder, but before he can get a word out, my tongue is running over his hole.

His muscles tighten under my grip on his hips, and he lets out a grunt.

"Fuck," he mutters as I lick him again.

The tension in his body releases as I continue to lick and suck his hole, his moans and groans intensifying. His head drops to the bed as I push my tongue into him, and watching him unravel as I fuck his ass with my tongue is a feeling I can't even describe. Seeing him lose himself when we fuck is one thing… but this? This is a whole other level of trust and vulnerability, and I don't think I've ever felt more turned on by him than in this moment.

Ty moans into the bed as I work him, his ass pushing back into me like he can't get enough. And I greedily take it all because neither can I.

But I can give him more.

Keeping my mouth on his ass, I grab the lube and coat my fingers. And the guttural moan that escapes him as I remove my tongue and push a finger into him almost has me coming.

"Holy fuck," I murmur as I watch my finger sink into his tight ass, and the muscles of his back flex as he pushes up onto his elbows. I don't even care that his hat has come off somewhere along the way.

As my finger moves in and out of his ass, I bring my other hand to his cock and stroke.

"Jesus Christ," Ty groans, dropping his head again to his hands.

I smile, knowing the best is yet to come. And as I slide a second finger into him, and find his prostate, he's fucking done for.

He pushes his ass back against my fingers as I continue to stroke his cock and rub that perfect spot inside him, giving himself to me completely and letting me do whatever I want to him.

So it's time to take this further.

I pull my fingers from his ass, and Ty looks over his shoulder at me, eyes glassy and face flushed.

I smile, loving this look on him. “Am I fucking you now, or what?”

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THIRTEEN

MY EYES STAY LOCKED on Luca's, and all I can do is nod.

As I watch him lube up his cock and rub more over my ass, my heart thrashes. I can barely move or think, and I don't even know what just happened… my body completely took over as I did exactly what Luca asked of me.

I gave it all up to him.

And I really fucking liked it.

I don't even care that he's pushing me to my limits, both mentally and physically, because it feels good. *He* feels good.

And I want more.

Luca pushes himself up onto his knees, moving in closer to me as he grips his cock with one hand and my hip with the other. "Ready, Tiger?"

I keep my eyes on his for a moment longer as I prepare to give him complete control over me. But as I nod again, he doesn't move.

The corner of his lips tilt up as his grip on my hip tightens. "Tell me."

A ripple of tension courses through me, and the familiar urge rises to knock him down a peg. Maybe I've reached my limit after all. I start to roll over, but Luca places a hand firmly on my back and presses me down into the mattress.

"I need to hear it, Ty," he says in a low voice. "Tell me what it is you want me to do to you."

The tension grows as I try to roll over again, but he doesn't let me. And suddenly, an intense need to put him in his place takes over me. In one swift move I push up onto my hands, get my knee under me, and turn around to

face him. My hand quickly finds his throat as I push up onto my knees and stare into his eyes.

He chuckles, and I squeeze my hand around his throat. His eyes darken slightly, but he doesn't say anything. He simply pulls his bottom lip between his teeth with a slight smile and waits. Because he understands. He knows I need to take this from him before I give it all up again.

My grip on him is dangerously tight as I lean in close, his gaze not straying from mine. As my lips brush over his, I let out a breath and give in. "Fuck me."

His hands land on my chest, and he forcefully pushes me onto my back as I let go of his throat. My heart beats wildly as he nudges my knee aside to settle between my legs and he grasps his cock again to push into me.

But before he does, he lifts his eyes to mine with a smirk. "I would say tell me if it's too much, but you won't be able to back down from this, will you?"

"Just do it," I growl, the anticipation building to an unbearable level.

Luca chuckles, lowering his gaze to his cock as he pushes his hips forward.

The burning sensation, and the uncomfortable stretch as he enters my ass, has me wanting to push him back and tell him to stop. But I don't, and he keeps going as he slowly stretches me. My eyes close as I let the discomfort and this odd, unfamiliar feeling take over. But eventually, that feeling morphs into a warm pleasure, and a comforting feeling of fullness rolls through me.

My eyes open as a moan escapes me, and Luca runs his hand down my abs as his hips meet my ass.

"Fuck," he mutters.

He slowly pulls his hips back, and as he gently thrusts into me, an intense vulnerability settles deep in my chest. And I don't know what to do with it.

My hand lands on his arm, and I am vaguely aware that I am holding onto him in a bruising grip. His eyes lift to meet mine as he slides in and out of me again, slowly and carefully.

But I still don't tell him to stop. Because with every thrust into me, the fear, resistance and discomfort lessens. I don't need to protect myself here, with him. I can let the walls down, let myself feel, and put my trust in Luca to keep me safe.

I release his arm, sliding my hand to his side to rest it over his ribs.

He glances down at my hand over the moon and stars tattoo. And when he brings his gaze back to me, his eyes are full of heat and want.

“Tell me how you want it, Ty. Hard and fast, or soft and slow?” he asks with a sly smile.

I huff out an amused breath at the reminder of him sucking me after that weird chess game. “You know the answer to that.”

Luca smiles as he grasps my knee, pulls back, and thrusts into me hard. And *fuck*… it’s overwhelming. In the best way.

As he continues to fuck me, hard and fast as promised, I groan at both the sensation and sight. His tattooed abs flex with each roll of his hips, and his curls are hanging over his eyes as he stares down at my body.

“Fuck, Ty…” Luca moans as he takes my cock in his fist and pumps me in time with his thrusts.

The feeling is unlike anything I’ve ever felt before, and all I can do is tip my head back and moan. The full feeling and pressure in my ass, sending waves of pleasure through my entire body while he strokes my sensitive dick… fuck. I feel like I’m going to come any second now.

I reach up to grab the back of his neck and pull him down to me. His hands land on either side of my head as our lips meet in a messy and heated kiss as he fucks me harder and harder.

I’m fucking desperate. Desperate for more as he drops his lips to my neck with a moan and I feel him start to unravel. My hand drops to my cock as the pressure builds, the overwhelming feeling of him in my ass and his lips on my neck quickly bringing me closer to the edge. But Luca pushes himself back onto his knees, batting my hand away so he can stroke my cock instead.

“I’m going to come,” I pant, bringing my hands to his legs and squeezing hard.

He just nods, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths as he thrusts into me and strokes my dick. He looks like he’s barely hanging on, getting closer to ruin with every thrust.

Tingles spread throughout my entire body as my muscles tense, and my head tips back with a groan. Pleasure crashes over me as I come harder than I think I ever have before. Luca watches as I lose myself completely, and my abs and his hand are coated in my cum. And as he lifts his hand to his

mouth, licking his fingers as he continues to pound into me, he moans and closes his eyes.

I can't tear my eyes off him as he comes in my ass, his head dropping to his chest as he grips my hips and his muscles tremble.

Fuck.

We remain still and silent for a moment, Luca still in my ass as we take a moment to catch our breath. Until he leans forward, running his fingers through the cum on my abs, and over my nipple. His head drops so he can lick it off, sending a shiver up my spine before he pushes his tongue into my mouth. I take it all, wrapping my hand around the back of his neck to keep him here.

Every single lock has come undone, and all my doors are open. And I haven't felt this light and free in a long time.

Only Luca fucking Mitchell.

I stare down at Luca, twisted up in his purple comforter, head half on a pillow with arms, legs and curls everywhere. He's still sound asleep, and I've been up for hours.

I tap his shoulder and he just groans, not moving. With a sigh, I tap him again. One eye opens and he sleepily peers up at me as I hold out a coffee mug for him. But he just groans again.

"It's 8:30. I let you sleep in. It's time to get up," I say, still holding out the coffee for him.

"Fuck off," he murmurs as he pulls the blankets over his head.

I sigh again, setting the coffee on the bedside table. "I'm leaving for the gym in a few minutes."

"Oh my god," Luca's muffled voice sounds from within the bed. "Just chill for a fucking second, we just woke up."

"No, *you* just woke up," I say. "I've been awake for hours."

He whips the blankets back, sending an icy glare my way. "And whose fucking problem is that?"

“Yours.” I cross my arms. “Because we’re meeting with Max today to go over training plans, then I’m helping Seb with takedowns and you’re working with Elijah on kick drills.”

“Yeah,” he says flatly, “at 12:00. So why the fuck are you waking me up in the wee hours of the morning on a Saturday to go to the gym three and a half fucking hours early?”

“Because I figured it would be a good time for you to work on sweeps beforehand.”

Luca sits up in bed as he eyes me warily. “Oh. That’s manipulative as fuck.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “To support you?”

“To get me out of bed early on a Saturday so you can support me at *your* desired time.”

“The fuck are you talking about?” I ask. “There’s time this morning. And we either do it now or this evening when everything else is finished. But guaranteed, something is going to come up and you’ll want to go out tonight, so it’s better to do it now.”

He huffs out a light laugh. “So, you’re telling me that if we train this morning, you’ll be ok with going out tonight?” A sly smile forms on his lips. “Because it sounds like this could also be a way to create *more* time for *extra* training tonight. Like… sparring?”

My jaw tics as I stare back at him, and his smile widens. While that was not my plan… the thought did cross my mind.

“Gotcha, fucker.” Luca chuckles. “I can read you like a manual.”

“A manual?” I ask, crossing my arms. “You mean a book.”

He thinks on that for a moment but waves a hand in dismissal. “A manual suits you better.” He runs a hand over his face with a groan. “Ok. I’ll get up and go to the gym with you. *If* we go out tonight. No sparring or training in striking today, we can do that tomorrow.”

A swell of anxiety forms in the pit of my stomach at that thought, but I nod. “Fine.”

Luca lifts his eyes to me.

“Oh, fuck off.” I roll my eyes. “*Ok.*”

He nods in approval, then holds his hand out with a sigh.

I look down at it, and keep my arms crossed. “What?”

“I’ll take my coffee now,” he says.

“It’s right there.” I point to the bedside table, where his coffee is sitting about a foot away from his outstretched hand.

But all he does is wiggle his fingers, waiting for me to pass it to him.

Fuck that.

I turn to leave the room, and Luca cackles from the bed. “Ohh, you’re going to need some good, regular fuckings to keep you loose.” He then snorts. “In more ways than one…”

As I leave the room, I just shake my head with a slight smile.

I’m not opposed to that.

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FOURTEEN

"WE'LL START with some grip variations in the butterfly sweep," Ty says as we step onto the mats in the quiet gym, since no one is here yet at 9:30 on a *Saturday morning*.

And even though I'm tired as all hell from fucking late into the night last night, the sunlight streaming into the gym through the windows is a nice touch. Not that I plan on telling him that.

I yawn with a nod. "Yes, Master."

He shoots me a look as he drops to his knees on the mat.

With a chuckle, I move into position as well, sitting on my butt before him and putting us into butterfly guard as I hook my feet around his inner thighs.

"So, what's the plan here, boss?" I ask. "You going for the usual? Set me up to sweep you, but you block it and then pull out some kind of crazy-ass defense I've never seen before? Or should we just cut to the chase and you tell me I'm wrong before we even begin?"

He stares at me for a moment, blank faced, before he shakes his head. "Do a sweep, I'll follow."

My eyebrows lift in surprise. "Wow, you really are loose." Then I smile. "How's your ass?"

"Able to take more. But if you don't shut up and get this started, I'll shove the stick back up there myself."

Oh my god.

I stare at him, jaw dropped. "That's actually kinda hot," I whisper.

Ty huffs out a breath of annoyance and shoves my head down into position against his chest to get started. And fuck, if that also doesn't do something to me…

But now is not the time to entertain my dick. It's time to put this asshole on his back.

Fuck. Come on, Luca. Focus.

With a deep breath, I keep myself low and close to his body, bringing my left arm under his to wrap around the back of his shoulder. And as my right hand grabs his elbow, I pop my leg down and roll to the right in one quick motion, taking him with me. And as I move him onto his back, I roll as well to lean over his torso, taking side control.

And now I have conflicting feelings. Because as much I love seeing him on his back, and that was a solid butterfly sweep, I'm actually pissed that he just let it happen without any of his fancy *gotcha* moments. I know they're in there, and I can't help but feel like I've just been set up.

"That was sloppy," he says.

There it is.

"The fuck?" I push back onto my knees. "That was a textbook butterfly sweep. And you didn't defend, so I did everything right."

He sits up, nodding. "And if I did defend, you did everything wrong. You kept both hooks in, so before you even started I could have either stepped in to force a change in guard or grabbed your legs and tipped you back."

My jaw clenches as I stare back at him. "And you couldn't have told me this when I got into position?"

"You would have taken it?" he asks. "Because you started off with an attitude, telling me that wasn't going to go well if I did."

Fucking asshole.

"Argh," I grunt, getting back into position and motioning for him to do the same. "Ok, whatever. So, I'll keep one leg short to prevent you from stepping in or unbalancing me. Then what?"

As he moves onto his knees before me, I hook one foot on his thigh, and bend my other knee, bringing my foot in close to my butt.

"You also want to keep a distance with your hips," Ty says as he grabs my foot on his thigh and pulls it back, creating more distance between us. "With both hooks in you want to get close. But with just one, keep a distance and lean in. This gives you time to defend against your opponent if

they drop under your arm and go for a body lock, which I could have. Then you have time and space to react with an overhook sweep, or attack the neck."

I sigh as I let that play out in my head. And fuck… it's great. I look into his eyes, narrowing mine. "I hate you."

"Feeling is mutual," he mutters, then gestures for me to sweep.

But before I can, the sound of the gym door opening echoes throughout the empty space. We both turn our heads to see Rosa enter.

"Hey, guys." She smiles as she walks over to us. "You're here bright and early."

"Don't I fucking know it," I murmur, rolling my eyes at Ty.

He just shakes his head with a huff, and Rosa laughs.

"Ah, butterfly sweep," she says as she takes in our position on the mat. "Good call, Luca, shortening that leg. Keeps this one from being able to upend you or change up the guard." She points a thumb at Ty with a smirk.

And Ty just tilts his head with a smug-as-fuck smirk aimed my way.

"Oh, aren't you pleased with yourself." I lift my foot from inside his thigh and kick his stomach, his grunt immediately lifting my spirits.

I stand, ignoring Ty's glare and happy for a little break to calm my frustration. "You're also here early," I say to Rosa with a smile. "What are you working on today?"

"I thought it would be nice to do some yoga in the sunshine before the gym gets busy." She watches as Ty stands as well, shooting daggers at me. "Don't let me interrupt–" she starts, but I wave my hand in the air.

"You're not," I say. "Don't worry about him. He's just always mad."

"Oh, fuck off." Ty crosses his arms and rolls his eyes at me.

I point a thumb at him and nod at Rosa. "See?"

She chuckles, reaching a hand out to squeeze Ty's arm. "Nah. He's a soft soul." Her eyes sparkle as they slide to me. "It's just hard and tiring work to reel you in."

Ty lets out a light laugh. "Got that right."

My hand flies to my chest as my mouth drops open in shock. "Rosa," I gasp. "Not you too…"

She chuckles and turns to leave, winking at Ty. "Go easy on him."

"No promises," Ty says as he gives her a smile.

I shake my head in disbelief over the betrayal. But before Rosa can get very far… I see a wonderful opportunity.

“Oh, and Rosa?”

She turns around to face us again. “Yeah?”

“I bet if you wanted to do something tonight, we would *both* be free.” I gesture between me and Ty, and I see him out of the corner of my eye as he slowly turns his head to me.

Rosa’s soft brown eyes flick between us as a smile slowly spreads across her face. Her gaze lands on Ty, and I can see the excitement brewing in her. “You up for dinner after training?”

I turn to face Ty, crossing my arms and tilting my head as we await his answer. He doesn’t look at me, but I see him tense as the war inside him begins. The urge to say no trying to take over, even though he has his answer.

He shifts his weight on his feet and nods at Rosa. “Yeah.”

She lets out an adorable squeal as she hops on her toes and claps her hands. “Oh, amazing! I’ll let everyone know!” She beams at Ty and steps closer to him. “You want to go to the Mexican place on Watson? It’s actually really good and has the most authentic Mexican food of all the places I’ve been to here. *Almost* as good as home.” She looks up at Ty hopefully, like she can’t believe this is really happening.

Ty smiles at her with a nod. “Sounds good.”

And I can’t help but smile at him. Because he looks genuinely happy and excited to be making these plans with her, despite the tension in him just moments ago.

“I’m excited!” Rosa flashes one more big smile at us before she turns and heads for the locker room, calling over her shoulder, “And we’ll do a shot of *real* tequila!”

I grin at Ty as he slowly turns to face me.

I lift my finger to point at my chest, then to the mats. “I promised.” Then I point at him. “You promised.”

He nods, closing the distance between us and placing a hand on my shoulder. “I know,” he says as he pushes me down to the mat.

But as we move back into butterfly guard to keep working on sweeps, he pauses and looks into my eyes for a moment. Then he leans in, lightly pressing his lips to mine. “Thanks.”

“Salud!”

We all clink our shot glasses together, then knock back our tequila.

“Whoa,” Seb nods, sucking on his lime. “That’s some good shit.”

“Told ya,” Rosa smiles at him as she pops a chip with guacamole into her mouth.

I chuckle, pulling my lime from my lips and placing it into my empty shot glass next to Ty’s. And I notice he didn’t even take his lime.

I point at it. “You’re supposed to suck that after.”

He looks down at the lime and shrugs one shoulder. “Why?”

I snort. “Didn’t do tequila in your wild days? Even unhinged Ty didn’t celebrate Cinco de Mayo?”

He grabs the last bite of his taco, ignoring me.

“I get it,” I shrug, scooping up some guacamole with a chip, “nothing beats sucking my cock. I could pour some tequila on it for you next time?”

Adão stifles a laugh from the other side of me, while Ty closes his eyes with a sigh.

Elijah snorts as he takes a sip of his water. “Um, well, regardless of all that, the tequila was good.” He chuckles and points over his shoulder at the bar. “If it wasn’t four weeks to fight time, I’d snag us another round.” He then shoots me a panicked look. “To drink.”

I laugh, holding up my water in a cheers motion to him.

Ty rubs his hand on his thigh, his leg bouncing slightly as he leans back in his chair. But I nudge him with my knee under the table and shake my head at him. That little reminder that we’re four weeks out from Dallas is sending him back into his head, and that’s not going to happen on my watch. Because we fucking got this.

“Maybe not a round of tequila, but another round of tacos?” Seb asks, looking around the table hopefully. “These are fucking delightful, and I’m treating this as my last meal before the hard-core training diet begins tomorrow.”

Noah nods, finishing the last of his taco. “I’m in. Last time we were here I think we did three rounds,” he chuckles.

Rosa laughs with a nod, and I suppress a smile. Interesting. No one else has been here with Rosa before… Looks like my hunch that something is going on between them could be true…

“I’ll go grab them,” I say, pushing my chair back and glancing at the window where we order to see the line dwindling. It’s a cool place, set up like a street food venue with a literal food truck inside the restaurant to order from.

Elijah pushes his chair back as well. “I’ll help.”

We step into line behind the person ordering at the window, and Elijah lets out a low whistle.

“What?” I ask.

He subtly points with his chin to a table nearby, where two girls are drinking margaritas. “Pretty.”

I chuckle as we step up to the truck. “Go chat. I’ll order.”

He immediately blushes and shakes his head. “Nah, it’s alright.”

I smile, forming a plan in my head as I place our order for another round of tacos for our table. And as we step aside to wait for our order, I nudge him towards the table with the girls.

“What are you doing?” he nudges me back, looking all cute and shy.

“Wingmanning,” I say, then slap on a smile as the girls look up from their drinks.

“Hi,” one of them says, her eyes landing on Elijah.

“Hey.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “How’s it going?”

“Great,” she smiles at him.

Good lord.

“I’m Luca, this is Elijah,” I say, pointing at him. “We’re just waiting for tacos, mind if we chill here?”

“No problem,” the other girl smiles between us. “I’m Emily.”

The one with her eyes locked on Elijah leans a bit closer to him. “Andrea.”

“Nice to meet you,” Elijah says, a small blush creeping up his neck. “This is a cool place, it’s our first time here.”

“We love it.” Amy, or no… Amelia nods. “They have the best margaritas.”

“Elijah likes margaritas,” I say, ready to get to the point here. “He can’t drink right now though, as he’s training for a fight.”

“A fight?” Emma’s eyes widen.

“MMA,” Elijah says with a nod, his eyes flicking to me briefly, like he’s checking if he’s doing this right. Oh, poor little soul.

“Oh, wow.” Amelia’s eyebrows lift in surprise. “That’s crazy. You from here?”

“Montreal,” Elijah says. “I moved here a few months ago to train.”

I smile, letting my little bird spread his wings and take this conversation on his own. And as my eyes land on our table across the restaurant, I’m met with a dark, piercing gaze. I can see the muscle twitching in Ty’s jaw from here.

“Do you fight too?”

“Hm?” I bring my attention back to the other girl before me. Ella, I think.

She tips her head towards Elijah, as he chats up his hopeful future date. “Do you train with him?”

“Oh, yeah.” I nod and smile at her. “We train at the same gym. We’re here with our teammates.”

I gesture towards our table, and she turns to look. Ty is still watching me as everyone else happily chats and snacks on chips and guac, and fuck me… the intensity in his stare, like he’s fucking *claiming* me, is getting me all kinds of worked up.

Ella turns back to me with a smile. “That’s awesome. My boyfriend is obsessed with UFC.”

“As he should be.” I wink at her, and she laughs.

“Order number twelve!”

“That’s us,” I say, tapping Elijah on the arm, and trying not to smile too hard when I see them exchanging numbers.

We say our good-byes to the girls, grab our tacos and head back to the table. Elijah is beaming and practically floating on air as he tucks his phone back in his pocket.

As we sit back down at the table, setting the tacos in the middle to a round of happy cheers, Ty continues to glare at me.

“Something you need to get off your chest, Tiger?” I ask, grabbing a taco and tossing it onto his plate.

“The fuck was that?” he asks in a low voice, his eyes sliding to the table with the two girls, and then back to me.

I chuckle. “I’m a friendly guy. Thought you knew that?”

He doesn’t say anything, and doesn’t move to eat his taco.

And as I turn my head to look at him, I let a sly smile take over. “Jealous, Ty?”

His eyes narrow and darken.

“You think I was interested?” I ask playfully, letting everything fade into background noise as his gaze pierces my soul. “You think I was *flirting*?”

“No.” Ty leans in closer to me. “Because you fucking know better than that.”

I huff out a light laugh, leaning in as well so our noses are almost touching. “I do? And what is it that I know?”

His hand lifts, grabbing my jaw forcefully. “That you’re *mine*.”

My heart thunders as I take in the dominating look in his eyes. I smile, closing the small distance between us to pull his bottom lip between my teeth, biting hard before I release it. “Fucking right I am.”

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FIFTEEN

“OH MAN, AN AUDI,” Tim groans as he checks his next appointment. “I don’t know what I’m doing to it yet, and I already know it’s going to suck.”

I chuckle as I happily work on the Harley Davidson Night Train before me. I don’t envy him in the slightest. German cars are notoriously hard to work on with their ridiculous design that overcomplicates everything. What could be a four-step process usually ends up being over twenty.

“Motorcycles look fun,” Tim says as he tilts his head and lets his eyes run over the bike. “Maybe I should get my certification.”

Jake snorts a laugh from under the hood of the car in his bay. “You’ll have to learn how to drive one.”

“I could.” Tim nods, shooting him a look.

I smile at him as I remove the rear shock on the bike so I can replace it. “That’s actually the best part of the job.” Which is completely true. Getting to test drive them after servicing is a major perk, since I haven’t had a bike of my own since I was young, stupid and had my priorities in all the wrong places. Selling my bike for a high was the dumbest thing I’ve ever done. But maybe it’s time I think about getting another one.

“We’re going to talk more about this.” Tim points at me as he heads out of the garage to grab the Audi.

Jake closes the hood on his car, wiping his hands on a rag. “Man, this week has been brutal so far with these jobs.” He flops down onto the stool at his bench to write out his service order. “Thank god tomorrow is Friday.”

I nod, greasing the bushes and bolts so I can fit the new shock. With the amount of seasonal tire changeovers and repairs coming in, I’m surprised

we haven’t been pulling overtime. “Yeah, spring is definitely here.”

He looks up and smiles at me. “Speaking of spring and nice weather, you and Luca will have to come over again soon. We can barbecue the right way this time, and grill and eat outside.”

I smile at Jake as Tim pulls the Audi car into his bay. “Sounds good.”

“And now that Tim finally found someone, he can bring his girlfriend,” Jake says, turning to Tim as he gets out of the car. But he quickly glances at me with wide eyes, then back to Tim. “Uh, I mean… you said Marie, so I’m assuming a girlfriend? I don’t want to make the same mistake I did with Luca, when I assumed…” he trails off, rubbing the back of his neck.

A laugh escapes me at the reminder of Jake meeting Luca for the first time, when he told me to bring my girlfriend over for a barbecue.

I shake my head as I wiggle the new shock into place. “He got over it quick enough. And enjoyed it.”

Tim laughs while Jake winces with embarrassment. “Well, to make up for it, we’ll have another one. But,” Jake eyes me, “I’m guessing you’re not exactly scarfing down ribs and drinking beer this close to a fight?”

I lift my eyes to him with a slight shake of my head. “Pretty strict diet from now until fight time.”

He smiles. “Figured. Well, we’ll celebrate after you guys win then.”

I force a smile back, trying to ignore the anxious feelings swirling around within me. We’re now almost three weeks out, and I’m still not where I want to be. So the thought of celebrating a win is pretty fucking daunting.

But I put my head down and just focus on finishing my job on this bike. Losing myself to my work and seeing it all come together is a good feeling, which helps me forget everything else. And after taking it out for a test ride to ensure it’s handling smoothly, I’m feeling great.

Until I see a text on my phone.

MAX

Hey Ty. Come see me today when you get in. Just want to go over your plan for the next couple weeks and catch up.

Fuck.

And now all those anxious feelings come rushing back in, and the thoughts I’ve been trying to keep out all week are taking over.

I’m behind. I’m not ready.

This is the most important fight I've ever had, and I need the win for LFA. And even though I've progressed and am now taking light hits to the side of the head in a controlled drill, I'm still shaky. And that's not fucking good enough.

I toss my phone on the bench and drop down to my stool. I need to get over this. Once I can take a hit, everything else will be fine. That's the only thing I'm getting hung up on. My grappling is solid, my attack is strong… but I need to be able to get hit and redirect without *any* hesitation.

My eyes drift back to my phone, and I sigh. Right now, though… I need something else.

I pick up my phone, tapping out a text.

Hey. How's work

The bubbles immediately start dancing, and within seconds I have a response. And I regret everything.

LUCA

shocked face emoji

Did you just… INITIATE a text to me??

With an open-ended question about MY DAY?

Omg. This is huge.

Tyler. I'm so proud.

I shouldn't have done this.

And now I'll never do it again.

Luca immediately starts texting back, and I'm tempted to lock my screen and ignore him. But for some reason, I don't.

Fuck that, this is fantastic.

So, because I have hockey tonight and won't be at the gym, you're going to miss me. I get it.

I'm just between classes, so I'm more than happy to fill you in on my day now so you're not left waiting in suspense. Buckle in, it's a lot.

So this morning on the playground before school started, I made an EPIC save. One of the kindergarteners almost took an unintentional nosedive off the slide. But nope. I was there. Caught him. THEN one of the third graders was SO close to getting smacked right in the face by a rogue soccer ball, but guess who deflected it? That's right. Me. So, at this point, I'm feeling like a goddamn superhero.

His texts continue to stream in at a rapid pace, outlining every detail about his day so far. And as I watch them roll in, with no time for me to respond to anything even if I wanted to… I smile.

Insufferable.

But just what I needed.

I knock on Max's open office door, and he looks up from his desk.

"Hey, Ty," he says with a smile. "Come on in."

"Hey." I enter his office, sitting on one of the chairs and set my bag by my feet.

Max gets up from behind his desk and walks over to the door, closing it.

Shit.

"Easy," he says in a reassuring tone. "It's ok."

I nod, although I'm anything but reassured. Fear floods my veins as I consider what this could all mean. If I'm about to lose everything right now, and my world is going to come crashing down around me. If I'm no longer good enough to be in this gym.

"I just want to see how everything is going." Max sits on the edge of his desk, placing his hands on either side of him. "You're looking good, and making great progress."

My eyes lift to meet his, which are soft as he watches me, and I give him a tight nod.

"But…" he says gently.

"I know." I nod, shifting in my seat and dropping my gaze to my lap. "I'm behind. But I'm going to fix it. I'll be good to go."

He's silent for a moment, and I don't look up.

“I don’t want to put any pressure on you, but…” he pushes off the desk and sits in the chair across from me, “I think you may have to consider withdrawing from Dallas if you don’t think you’ll be ready in time. By one week out, we’ll have to assess–”

“Fuck that,” I snap, lifting my eyes to glare at him as a swell of anger rolls through me.

Max doesn’t react at all to my outburst as he just nods calmly. “I know it’s hard to hear. But Ty,” he says with a shake of his head, “it would be completely irresponsible, of both of us, for you to go out there if you’re not one hundred percent ready–”

“I will be.” I stare back at him. “I still have three weeks.”

He nods again. “Yeah. And I hope more than anything you’ll be ready. But,” he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and giving me a firm look, “*I* will be making this call.”

As I continue to glare at him, the fear I’ve been working so hard to suppress is unleashed, mixing with the anger that continues to build. Because right now, I feel closer than ever to losing everything. If I don’t fight in Dallas, I don’t go to LFA.

And under the surface of it all… is disappointment. I’ve been working my ass off, and I’ve made progress.

But it’s not enough.

And I’ll be left behind…

“Understood?” Max asks, eyeing me.

I nod, dropping my gaze from his.

“Ok,” he says softly. “You’re doing excellent work, Ty. Keep it up, and we’re just going to take it one day at a time. No matter what happens with this fight, you’re still a part of this team. It’s just one opportunity, and it isn’t going to define everything for you. There will be others.”

“Yeah,” I say, grabbing my bag as I stand up. “Thanks.”

I head for the door, completely aware I’m being a dick, but also thankful that Max lets me leave without saying anything else.

With my head down, I go right to the locker room. But as I get to my locker, I drop my bag and press my forehead against it.

Fuck.

And as I turn around, my eyes land on Luca’s locker. The one with a sticker of a fucking unicorn lifting weights… and a tiger.

I walk over to it, running my fingers over the ridiculous stickers and taking in a deep breath.

I have to do this. I can’t let either of us down.

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SIXTEEN

I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN I give great high-fives. But now, I know they are *legendary*. Because as I make my way down the hall at the end of the day, the kids all run at me demanding the most epic of high-fives. And I *deliver.*

As I push the door open and the sunshine hits my face, I'm in a fan-fucking-tastic mood. We had a great day of basketball in Phys. Ed., and now it's the weekend. I don't think it can get much better than this.

"Still riding the high from our win last night?" Dan asks with a chuckle as I approach him with a smile. Poor guy is on bus duty today, and the least I can do is stop by for a visit on my way to the parking lot.

"Obviously," I say, laughing as one of the kids waiting for the bus fakes out a high-five, going for the just as epic low-five instead. "We're in the perfect position to bring home gold at the end of the season."

Dan smiles. "Oh yeah."

"Mr. Mitchell?" One of the boys standing with Dan taps my arm.

"Yeah?" I ask, looking down at Ryland as he stares up at me with a confused expression.

"Why aren't you here every day?" he asks.

"Because I help Ms. Sandford when she isn't feeling well and isn't able to come to school." I lift my eyes to Dan, and he gives me a little shrug.

Diane, the Phys. Ed. teacher here at Westmount Elementary School, has been taking more and more time off due to her health, and the kids are starting to ask a lot of questions. And as I don't know what Diane's plan is for the next bit, I don't know how to answer these questions. Although, I did hear some rumblings in the break room that she may be taking long-

term medical leave. And as much as I don't want to benefit from someone's misfortune… I wouldn't mind being here full time.

"So," Ryland tilts his head with a thoughtful expression, "can you come more? Because you play monster attack time with us, and Ms. Sanford doesn't."

"Yeah! I love monster attack time!" Tarin yells from his spot on the grass near the sidewalk.

Dan cocks an eyebrow at me. "Monster attack time?"

"It's the best game ever," one of the other kids, Asher, pipes up. "We play at the end of Phys. Ed. Mr. Mitchell turns into a monster and runs around the gym trying to get anyone who still has a ball. But if you put the ball away, you get to chase and attack the monster before time runs out!"

"Yeah!" Ryland smiles and bounces excitedly. "We jump on him and take him down!"

Dan stares at me in horror and I just smile with a shrug. It motivates them to clean up quickly, and there *are* some rules, so it isn't as chaotic as they make it sound. Plus, I can take it. I'm faster than them anyway.

He chuckles, shaking his head in disbelief. "I think Mr. Mitchell is the only teacher who will ever do that." He then glances around and lowers his voice. "*And* Mr. Mitchell may want to consider letting the principal know if he wants to be here more, should full-time monster duties become available. Like… by next week." He gives me a pointed look, and I smile. Looks like the rumblings are true. Having a bestie at the school full time has its perks.

I nod. "Mr. Mitchell will definitely do that."

He winces. "Can we stop talking about you in third person now?"

"I guess so." I shrug.

The bus pulls up, and Dan shifts back into work mode, giving me a salute as he starts wrangling kids onto the bus. And just as I turn to leave, I come face to face with Isabelle.

She looks up at me with wide eyes and backs up a step, blushing. "Sorry, I…" She looks around for an escape, and I chuckle.

"It's ok." I smile at her, and she blushes again.

And I can't help but feel a bit bad for her. First it took me months to learn her name wasn't actually Mary-Megan, and then she was shut down pretty fucking hard when she was trying to flirt with me, and Ty shoved his tongue down my throat to shut her up. I don't blame her for feeling uncomfy around me. I would be too.

And now I’m getting all hot and bothered thinking about Ty claiming me in front of her, and then again the other night with the taco flirting fiasco…

Isabelle gives me a weird look, and I snap back to reality. Oh no. I’m sending mixed messages to the pretty but overbearing and embarrassed girl before me as I smile at her while thinking of my hot jealous man.

“Gotta go,” I say a bit too loudly, and duck around her to head to the parking lot.

The awkwardness will have to be addressed if I do end up here full time, but not right now. Because it’s a beautiful day, my Jeep windows are rolled down, and “Save Tonight” by Eagle-Eye Cherry is blaring. Nothing is going to get my mood down today.

And this day gets even better when I arrive at the gym and see Noah and Adão already here.

“Hey, man.” Adão smiles at me as I enter the locker room. “How’s it going?”

“Fantastic.” I drop my bag on the bench and pull my locker door open. “It’s a great day.”

Noah chuckles. “You’re in a good mood.”

“I am.” I pull my hoodie off and grab my shorts from my bag. “You guys are here early. Usually I’m all by my lonesome this early in the afternoon.”

Adão nods, downing the last of his pre-workout shake. “I had some flex time, figured I’d use it to get some extra time in on the bags today.”

“I finished up work early today too,” Noah says as he closes his locker door. “This close to fight time, I figured I’d get another workout in.”

“Good plan.” I nod, dropping my pants and pulling my shorts on. “Not long now, time to ramp it up.”

“Hell yeah. Looks like you and Ty have been working hard,” Adão says. “He’s doing alright?”

“Yeah, he’s great.” I smile, sitting on the bench and pulling my running shoes on. “Full body sparring and taking light hits to the side of the head in controlled drills.”

“That’s awesome.” Adão smiles. “Man, I couldn’t imagine coming back and getting ready for such an important fight so soon after a hit like that… That’s a lot of pressure. It would for sure get to me.”

“Really though,” Noah agrees. “He hasn’t had much time to recover from everything. He’s killing it.”

I nod, as he *has* been killing it. But that also gets me thinking about his mood last night and this morning. He stayed at the gym late last night, not getting to my place until almost an hour after I got home from hockey. He was quiet and withdrawn, which isn’t unusual, so I didn’t think anything of it. But actually, he almost seemed… sad. Maybe the pressure is getting to him more than he’s been letting on. He’s moving in the right direction, but knowing Ty, it’s never enough.

“It is a lot of pressure,” I say, standing up and slapping on a smile. “But we’re all going to kick ass.”

“Damn right,” Noah says and holds out a fist to bump.

We head out into the gym, and I push all the worrisome thoughts aside as I pull up an epic playlist and get lost to the music in my earbuds as I jog the track to warm up. But those thoughts return as Ty enters the gym while I’m stretching at the end of my run. He keeps his head down as he makes his way to the locker room, not lifting his eyes at all to look at anyone or anything. Not even me.

And when he exits the locker room in his black fight shorts and gray rash guard, he heads straight for the boxing ring, wrapping his hands as he goes. His eyes briefly find mine, then immediately fall back to his hands.

Oh great. This is going to be fun.

I grab my wraps from the bench and head over to join him at the side of the ring as he pulls his gloves on.

“Oh, hey there.” I smile at him tauntingly.

His eyes flick up to me, and he gives me a brief nod.

I huff out a breath of amusement. “And how was work today?”

“Good,” he mutters as he fastens the strap on his glove.

“Hm, informative.”

“Not today, Luca,” he sighs as he slides between the ropes.

Well, damn. All that work we’ve done to loosen him up, and we’re right back to tight-ass city.

“Alright…” I enter the ring after him, and I eye him as he moves to the middle of the ring.

He keeps his eyes cast down, and there’s a heavy presence about him. More than usual.

“Dude, what’s up?” I ask.

He shakes his head and takes a breath in. “Let’s start with jab-body kick-jab-cross.”

My brows lift in surprise. Any combos we’ve done so far have been isolated so that he can keep his guard tight. This is going to require him to shift his guard to block the kick and then lift it again, and honestly… I think he’s still too hesitant for it. “We’ve only done–”

“I know what we’ve *only* done,” he snaps. “Let’s do it.”

I bite my tongue so I don’t snap back at him. “You’re sure you can handle–”

“Let’s fucking go, Mitchell.” His eyes are dark and dangerous as he finally brings his gaze to meet mine, challenging me to push him further.

I scoff, stepping closer to him so we’re in striking range. “I see you’ve found an even bigger stick to place up your ass this time. How’d that feel going in?”

His jaw clenches as his chest rises, and the anger rolling off him right now doesn’t make any sense. He’s been making progress, and actually letting go and having some fun has been helping him. I know we’re close to fight time, but fuck… this is a drastic shift.

“Hands up,” he says darkly.

I observe him for a moment, unsure where this is coming from, but willing myself to let him have it. He wants to push his boundaries and see what happens? Fine. But I’m not so sure it’s going to go as well as he’s hoping it will. This is too much, too fast.

I lift my hands and move into my stance. “You going first?”

Ty nods, settling into his stance as well. I watch him as he takes a deep breath, retreating into his head as he prepares to attack. And then he delivers a flawless jab-body kick-jab-cross combo, and I block each strike.

But then the tension enters his shoulders as he prepares to defend against my attack on him. And I’m tempted not to do it. I want to drop my gloves and tell him we’ll continue with isolated drills, but the look of fierce determination on his face tells me that won’t go over so well. So, I choose the lesser of two evils, and go for it.

I keep my power light behind my first jab, which Ty successfully parries, then I put a bit more power behind my kick. He rotates his body to block my kick with his forearms, springing back into his guard and blocking my next jab. I see a slight flinch in his face on the final cross, but he successfully blocks each strike, keeping his feet and guard steady.

My face breaks out in a grin as I hop on my toes. “Well, damn,” I say. “Ok, so that was–”

“Again,” he says, his eyes focused on my gloves. “And don’t go so light this time.”

My brow furrows. “The fuck, man. Chill, you just took a jab and cross–”

“And I need to do it again.” He exhales. “And better. So, let’s go.”

Fuck. Dude needs another good ass fucking.

With a sigh, I get back into my stance and motion for him to attack, letting him expel his anger in his strikes on me. And *damn*, there’s some fucking weight behind them.

And this time when I strike him, I put a bit more force behind my jabs. He parries each one just as he should, but the uneasiness in him remains.

“Again. Harder,” he says.

I roll my eyes with another sigh, and we go through it again, and again, and again. Each time he attacks, his strikes are more forceful, and there’s a frustration and desperation in each one. He’s doing well to defend as he successfully blocks every strike, and his hesitations are fewer. But the anger in him seems to be rising despite his success… so I’m not sure this is really doing him any good.

I’ve lost count of how many rounds we’ve done, so I step back and wipe the sweat from my brow. “Ok,” I say, catching my breath. “What the fuck is going on?”

His head shakes slightly as he keeps his guard up, ready for more. “I need to get this.”

“Yeah,” I agree with a nod, keeping my gloves at my sides, “and you will. But fuck, why is the drill sergeant back? I finally got your ass to loosen the fuck up and now you’re all tight again, and not in a good way.”

“Come on.” Ty gestures for me to move back into the drill. “We’re not done.”

I take a deep breath and shake my head. “Why don’t we move back into isolation for a bit–”

“I don’t have all the fucking time in the world to ease back into this.” His eyes flash with rage as he drops his gloves. “I have only two weeks to get ready for the most important fight we’ve ever had, so get your fucking gloves up.”

I catch his eyes, and something almost like panic seems to pass through them.

“Two weeks?” I ask. “Fight is in three.”

His entire demeanor seems to shift in an instant as he gently taps his gloves together, and his eyes flick to Max at the other end of the gym where he’s working with Adão.

“Why two weeks?” I step closer to him, but he continues to avoid my gaze. I stay silent for a moment, watching him as the sadness I saw in him last night seems to take over once again. “Moon and stars, Ty. Tell me.”

He takes a deep breath and lifts his eyes to mine. “If I’m not 100% by one week out, Max is pulling me.”

Well, fuck.

I nod lightly, keeping my eyes on his and trying not to let my surprise and disappointment show. “Ok.” I nod again and tap my gloves together. “We have some work to do then. But,” I point a glove at him, “intense drills that push boundaries aren’t a great place to start.”

He opens his mouth, I’m sure to protest, but I press my glove to it.

“Ah,” I say, and he bats my glove away. I smile, pressing it to my chest instead. “Coach, remember?”

A mix of emotions play out in his expression as he sighs. Frustration, annoyance, anger and… a flicker of defeat. But fuck no. Nope, we’re not having *any* of that.

“We’re going to continue this drill,” I say, and a little light finds its way back into his eyes. “But we’re slowing the pace and power, and building up slowly.”

“Ok.” He nods, and I smile.

“First, five-minute break.” I turn towards the edge of the ring, slipping through the ropes to grab my water bottle. “Since you came out guns blazing today.”

As I set my water bottle down after taking a drink, my eyes catch a notification on my phone. An email from someone named Anthony Harris. Who the fuck is that? I tap it, wondering if it might be something about the Dallas fight.

But my stomach drops as my eyes travel over the subject line.

Subject: Opportunity at Sterling Academy

Dear Luca,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Anthony Harris, and I am the Dean of Browning Academy. We have yet to formally meet, however I have had the pleasure of hearing about your achievements during your time here at Browning, and in your teaching career thus far from your mother. In a recent conversation with her, she has mentioned your interest in working at Sterling Academy.

As you may know, Sterling Academy is located just outside of St. Louis and is a sister school to Browning. We highly value the exchange of talent and expertise between our institutions, and I believe your skills and dedication would be a great fit for Sterling. I wanted to personally invite you to apply for a position there.

This is a permanent, full-time Physical Education and Health teaching position for high school aged students, in a college prep environment.

I am more than happy to provide any additional information and support you through the application process. Sterling Academy offers a vibrant and nurturing environment, and I am confident that you will find it a rewarding place to advance your career.

Please feel free to reach out to me directly if you have any questions or need further assistance. I look forward to seeing your application and hopefully welcoming you to our extended educational community.

Warm regards,
Anthony Harris
Dean, Browning Academy

Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me.

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SEVENTEEN

MY EYES open to darkness as I'm woken by the smell of… cookies?

I turn my head to the empty spot in bed beside me, then hear the crash of a pan in the kitchen, followed by a muttered, "Shit."

What the fuck…

With a groan I get out of bed and open the bedroom door, shielding my eyes against the harsh light from the kitchen. Luca is standing at the counter, headphones over his ears and in deep concentration as he pours batter into a pan.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I ask, stepping into the kitchen and rubbing my eyes.

He doesn't answer, being so focused he doesn't even see me enter the kitchen. He just continues to scrape the batter from the bowl while listening to his music that is clearly loud enough to block out every other sound.

I walk up behind him and pull his headphones off one ear, causing him to drop the bowl and jump, sending a spray of batter over the counter.

"Holy shit." He stares at me with wide eyes, yanking his headphones down around his neck. "What the fuck?"

"Yeah," I nod looking around at the messy kitchen, "what the fuck."

"Did I wake you?" he asks.

I just stare back at him and gesture around the kitchen that has batter, bowls and pans everywhere. "Obviously."

He winces slightly, then grabs another bowl and starts sprinkling some kind of mixture over the pan.

"What are you doing?" I ask again.

Luca glances over his shoulder at me, then rakes his eyes over the kitchen with a look like I should already know the answer. “Baking.”

Annoyance is quickly rising as I rub my eyes again and sigh. “Yes, I see that. Why?”

He dramatically finishes sprinkling the stuff over the pan, then gestures to it with a wide smile. “Coffee cake for breakfast in the morning.”

But his smile doesn’t meet his eyes, and I can see that he knows he isn’t fooling me despite how hard he is trying. Something is going on. And I know this is stress baking.

I narrow my eyes at him, waiting for him to tell me the truth. And the innocence and forced happiness in his expression falters.

“Why are you baking at 3:30 in the fucking morning?” I ask again, stepping closer to him so he backs up and bumps into the counter behind him.

His eyes flick between mine, and his jaw tics slightly. He’s annoyed that he’s been caught… but caught hiding what?

“Moon and stars, Mitchell,” I say in a low voice, stepping even closer so that I can place my hands on the counter on either side of him. “Tell me.”

An irritated huff escapes him as he gives his head a slight shake. “Oh, fuck you,” he breathes.

But I don’t say anything else, and just wait. Trapping him here and staring into his eyes as I feel the energy in him shift. The irritation fades as he gives in. Because the moon and stars show us how we really feel.

He lets out a large sigh, placing a hand on my chest to push me back. “My parents are continuing to pressure me to work for this fucking private school.”

“The one you went to?” I ask, crossing my arms and leaning against the counter opposite him, trying to ignore the bit of panic in the pit of my stomach that he may some day give in, and move home. Away from me.

Luca scoffs, shaking his head. “When I told them I’m not moving back, my mother apparently shifted her focus to some sort of brother school or something outside St. Louis.” He then turns, pulling yet another mixing bowl out of the cupboard. “There’s an open Phys. Ed. and Health position there. A step up from high school science teacher in Warsaw, I guess. It’s *almost* like she’s listening, but at the same time, she’s not listening at all.”

Just as I open my mouth to ask if that’s something he’s interested in, he whips around and points a wooden spoon at me.

“*And* the position I sub for at Westmount is opening to full-time with Diane going on leave, and *that* is where I want to be. But do you think they’ll listen? Oh, no.” He lets out a dark chuckle as he turns back to his bowl and dumps flour in it. “Doesn’t matter what I want. Who cares if I’m happy being a monster with my elementary kids in the public school system. The cold, stuck-up, college prep high school is apparently where I’m supposed to be, teaching snarky teenagers about STIs and stuffy fucking sports like cricket.”

I take a moment to process this, as he measures out more ingredients. “So, you pretty much have the position you want…”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter.” Luca waves a hand in the air. “Doesn’t matter how many times I tell them I am right where I want to be, working towards *my* goals, they fucking meddle and set up meetings and tell Deans that I’m interested in things I’m not fucking interested in.”

“So…” I watch him as he frantically mixes his ingredients in the bowl, flour spilling out over the edge, “you’re baking instead of telling them to fuck off?”

He snorts and shakes his head. “If only it was that easy.”

“Could be.” I shrug. Then I step towards him as his stirring somehow becomes even more chaotic, and I think more is going to end up on the floor than in the bowl. “Just, stop.”

“No,” he mutters, angling himself away from me.

“Give me the spoon.” I reach for it, but he yanks the bowl away from me and tucks it under his arm.

“No,” he says again, glaring at me as he continues to stir.

I take a deep breath, willing myself to stay calm. “Give me the fucking spoon.”

“*No.*” Luca turns his body away from me again, protecting the bowl and narrowing his eyes at me like he’s daring me to make a move.

But before I can make that move, the oven timer goes off. Of course he already has something in there.

Luca’s eyes dart from me to the oven. “I need to get that.”

I gesture for him to do what he needs to do, and he takes the bowl and spoon with him. For Christ’s sake…

He pulls a tray of cookies from the oven and then unveils another pan from somewhere, sliding it in. And as I watch him, a feeling of guilt washes over me. While I’m pissed he didn’t tell me this was going on, I think I feel

worse about the fact that he's been there for me during my recovery and training, and I haven't been there for him. This has obviously been weighing on him for a while, and I didn't even notice.

"How long has this been going on?" I ask as he picks up his bowl again.

"Doesn't matter."

"It does fucking matter."

He sighs, finally setting his spoon down and turning to face me. "Ty, this has been going on my entire fucking life. It's nothing I can't handle, but right now, I don't want to handle it." He shrugs. "I'm going to do what I do best, which is bake the stress out, win a fucking fight, then face the wrath when they come out here in a few weeks."

Panic takes root again at that thought. "They're coming here?"

"Mm-hm." Luca nods, opening a drawer and pulling out a whisk. "Sounds fun, doesn't it?"

Picturing Luca's parents coming here to St. Louis, interfering in the life we've made for ourselves… probably adding me to the list of things they disapprove of… I can't help but feel some of that stress too.

And I hate that I don't know what to do to help him. Because once again… I'm lost. I don't know how to make this better, and I don't know how to take some of this stress away from him. And I really want to.

But as I watch him pour vanilla into a measuring spoon, I do know of one thing I could do for him right now.

Even though I'll never hear the end of it.

I lean against the counter beside him. "Want some help?"

His head whips towards me so fast I think he's going to break his neck. "Tyler fucking Roscoe, don't you toy with me."

A breath of laughter escapes me at the look of pure shock on his face. "If you want to bake and forget… then, let's bake and forget."

He stares at me for so long, I start to think he's actually had a stroke. But a smile spreads across his face, as pure joy radiates from him.

"Ever made cinnamon rolls?" he asks with a sparkle in his eye.

I cock an eyebrow at him. "What do you think?"

He smirks. "Surprising, considering it's your favorite snack."

I furrow my brow. "No, I don't–"

"Shh," he lifts a finger to my lips, "it is."

He chuckles as I smack his hand away. But seeing him back to his usual, annoying, happy self is enough for me to let that go.

He tilts his head towards the fridge. “We’ll need milk and eggs.”

I turn to get them, but his hand quickly grabs my arm to stop me. And this time when I meet his gaze, his smile meets his eyes. He pulls me closer, pressing his lips to mine. As I lift my hand to wrap my fingers around the back of his neck, I keep him close and deepen our kiss. Showing him that I’m going to try harder to be better at this. To be there for him.

Because I fucking love him.

When we part, he smiles again. “Alright then, sous-chef. Get me my eggs.”

Or do I.

The next few hours are spent baking, as we make cinnamon rolls, brownies, and even more cookies. And… it actually helps. Every thought that has been pushing its way in and weighing me down has left, and I feel an odd sense of ease and relaxation grow with every pan and tray pulled out of the oven. Even when Luca makes weird jokes about me licking the cinnamon sugar and filling up on cinnamon rolls before the main course. Fucking weirdo.

And after the counters pile up with baked goods and it gets light outside, Luca pulls me back into bed. For now, the rest of the world can fuck off.

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EIGHTEEN

I DON'T THINK I've ever seen Ty this peaceful.

Probably because he's asleep, but still.

The filtered sunlight coming in through my bedroom curtains highlights his perfect cheekbones, and his soft breaths fill the space between us as I sit in bed and watch him. I've never done this before, as I never see him sleeping since he wakes up at the ass crack of dawn. And something about this is just so… comforting. To see him in a state of complete relaxation, with no tension or worry.

I push the blankets back to get up and make coffee, but Ty immediately stirs, his dark eyes opening as he sleepily looks up at me. Of course, even after an all-nighter full of baking he's still a light sleeper.

"Morning, sunshine." I smile down at him.

But his brow furrows, and the tension makes its way back in as he sits up, looking confused as he glances at the window and takes in the daylight shining through.

"Coffee cake?" I ask.

"What time is it?" he asks, rubbing a hand over his face.

I shrug. "Don't know. Late enough to have missed Saturday morning cartoons."

He pushes the blankets back and gets up, heading out of the bedroom.

I chuckle and follow him into the kitchen, watching his ass in his boxers the whole way.

He finds his phone among the mess of baking supplies and bowls on the counter, and immediate panic takes over his features. "It's 1:30 in the

fucking afternoon."

"Hm," I stretch my arms over my head, "early. Could have used a few more hours."

He glares at me. "We just wasted an entire fucking morning."

"It's not the end of the world," I say with a chuckle. "I'm sure you had many sleepless nights and sleepy days in your wild era. And here you are, A-OK. Bad decisions are allowed sometimes."

Ty continues to stare at me for a moment. "You think a night spent chasing a high is comparable to a night spent baking?"

"No," I say with a shrug, and a smile. "But see? Not a big deal."

He sighs, tossing his phone back on the counter and turning towards the coffee maker.

I take one more glance at his ass before reaching for my phone as well. And my heart immediately sinks, my good mood snapped away in an instant. Two missed calls from my dad, and a voicemail. For fuck's sake.

"Luca."

My eyes lift to Ty as he eyes me. "Hm?"

"Did you get more coffee filters?"

"Oh, yeah." I point to the cupboard behind him.

But he doesn't move to get them, instead pointing to my phone. "You going to tell me what just happened?"

"Guess," I say, rubbing a hand over my face.

When I drop my hand, Ty is still standing before me, a look of uneasiness about him. And I can't help but smile. I know he wants to help, but I also know he has no idea how. And hey, I don't either. So, fuck it. All I do know is that I want to keep riding the high we had last night from baking together. If my parents want to keep nagging me and being a pin in my side, or a thorn in my head, or whatever it is, then they can go for it. I'll just keep holding them off a bit longer. I've been doing it for twenty-six years, what's another few weeks.

I close the distance between me and Ty and poke him in the head. "Let it go. Stop thinking."

He dodges another poke from me, shooting me an annoyed look. "It's obviously still bothering you. And if I can help…"

I smile as he trails off, a look of vulnerability about him as he tries to figure out what to do.

“You want to help?” I ask, then turn to a massive pile of cookies, brownies, cinnamon rolls and coffee cake on the counter. “What are we doing with these?”

He looks at the pile of baked goods and then back to me. “I figured you had a plan.”

“Nope.” I reach out and grab a cinnamon roll, then turn to Ty with a sly smile. “I know how you can help…”

His eyes drop to the cinnamon roll in my hand, then back up to me. “What?”

I hold it out to him. “Take a bite.”

Ty shakes his head. “I don’t want any.”

“Oh, but I think you do.” I step forward, still holding it out to him. “Come on, Tiger. Not even going to take a taste of your first baking experience?” With a tilt of my head, I put on my best puppy dog eyes. “For me?”

He doesn’t move for a moment as he continues to blankly stare back at me. But then, my heart fucking riots as he sighs and rolls his eyes, leaning forward to take a bite out of the cinnamon roll.

Nope. Not a riot… it’s going to fucking explode.

And if it does, I’ll at least die happy.

“That was hot,” I whisper, all the blood rushing to my cock as he licks some cinnamon sugar off his lip.

With a wary look aimed my way, Ty turns away from me and to the coffee maker. “Go get dressed. We need to get to the gym.”

“You guys are here late,” Max greets us as Ty and I enter the gym. “You’re usually the first ones in.”

“Yeah,” I sigh with a nod. “Sorry about that, boss. I wore Ty out last night teaching him about wrist action with buns and balls.”

Max’s eyes flick between us as his smile falls and Ty sighs.

“Oh god, not like that.” I wave a hand in the air with a scoff. “Come on, Max, get your mind out of the gutter. We were baking. It’s all about folding

in the wet and dry ingredients just right, and getting the perfect size balls for soft, gooey cookies."

Max nods slowly. "Ok then."

"Where do you want us today?" Ty asks, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Weights," Max says. "And tomorrow, I want you both on the mats for a full roll." He looks at me with a smirk. "You want to go hard on grappling for this fight, so let's see it. Then," his eyes slide to Ty, "we're going to have to get in the cage soon and spar."

Ty nods stiffly, adjusting his bag on his shoulder. "Yeah."

"I want to see some spars in the ring this week too," Max says to him, his tone softening a bit. "Del will be here to take you through some drills as well. We can talk more about it tomorrow."

"Ok." Ty nods again, dropping his eyes.

"Have a good workout." Max reaches out to squeeze Ty's shoulder and gives me a nod as he leaves.

And Ty immediately heads for the locker room.

As I follow him, I see him retreat further and further into his head with each step he takes. And yeah… that was a lot. He only has two weeks to prove to Max that he can do this, and the pressure is quickly rising as expectations for training increase.

Ty pulls his locker door open and tosses his bag on the bench. He's completely in his head now, and I know it's going to be hard to pull him out this time.

But just as I start to think about how I can do that, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I close my eyes and blow out a breath. I know exactly who that's going to be. And when I pull my phone out, I wish I didn't even bother checking.

DAD

Luca, this has gone on long enough. We listened, we heard you, and we are trying our hardest to work with you. But you need to let us. You have an opportunity within your reach, which is exactly what you want. You can continue to live near St. Louis and attend your gym. We want to help you formulate your response to Anthony and submit your application so you can be a competitive candidate. Your mother did you a huge favor by putting your name out there. Don't let her, or yourself, down.

How quickly things can go back to being so shitty.

I drop onto the bench and kick my shoes off, letting out a huge sigh.

Ty turns to face me as he pulls his t-shirt on. “What?”

“Text from my dad.” I stand, tossing my clothes into my locker. “He won’t give it a fucking rest.”

“I thought your plan was to ignore it?” Ty asks, closing his locker door and walking towards the exit.

“Trying my fucking hardest,” I mutter as I follow him.

As we make our way to the weight room, a heavy silence falls over both of us. And I take a moment to let myself seethe, because it’s getting harder and harder to push this all aside and focus on what I really need to. With my parents constantly breathing down my neck, trying to force me into what *they* want, making me feel like I’m not good enough, a poor reflection of them, and like I’m a failure for doing what I’m passionate about… it’s fucking chipping away at me. With the added stress of Ty possibly not being ready in time for Dallas… *fuck*.

I turn my head to look at him as we reach the weight room, and catch him anxiously glancing at the cage. And when his eyes meet mine, they’re full of anxiety.

“We need to get in the ring tonight,” he says with desperation in his voice.

I nod. “Yeah. Sure.”

Because I have nothing in me to fight it right now. Is it a good idea for him to push it today and get in the ring? Probably not. But it’s what he thinks he needs, and right now, I have no idea what’s best for us. So it’s easier to just give in.

I just wish we could go back to the happiness we felt in the kitchen last night.

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NINETEEN

“HEY, GUYS!” Rosa greets us with a smile as Luca and I enter the weight room.

I give her, Elijah, and Seb a nod in greeting, and Luca slaps on a smile.

“Hey,” he says. But the smile is weak and the usual cheer in his voice is missing.

And I fucking hate that. I hate that stress and pressure is now ruling our lives, seeping in and affecting both of us. Especially after we were finally able to let go of it last night.

Briefly.

With a sigh, I head to the side of the room to stretch and warm up for my workout.

Seb glances between me and Luca as he sets his weights on the rack. “Everything ok?”

“Yup,” Luca answers flatly, setting his water bottle on a bench. “Great.”

As I start my stretches, I watch Luca rub a hand over his face and turn his back to everyone. I don’t know why this text from his dad has caused such a drastic shift in him, especially after he was so quick and happy to push his missed calls aside this morning. And it’s kind of pissing me off. Because even though I don’t know how, I want to help him. But every time I try, he shuts it down with a smile and a joke, saying he just wants to forget it and focus on the fight.

Looks like that plan isn’t working so well anymore.

“Took the morning off?” Rosa smiles at me as she sits on the mat next to me to start her cooldown stretches.

I nod. “Yeah.”

“That’s great,” she says. “That must have felt good.”

Another sigh escapes me as I give a little shrug, once again looking out to the cage and trying to ignore the anxious anticipation. I should have been here this morning. I’m too far behind to have taken a morning off.

“You’re doing great, Ty,” Rosa says softly, looking up at me from the mat as she reaches forward to touch her toes. “Go easy on yourself.”

“It’s true,” Seb says, picking up another set of weights. “You’re rocking it, dude.”

“It’s not enough,” I mutter, stepping forward and grabbing some weights from the rack.

And as I step back, I catch Luca’s eyes in the mirror. He watches me for a moment with a furrowed brow, then turns away again with an unreadable expression on his face.

“So…” Elijah glances around nervously. “We’re all stuck on weights today, eh?” He smiles awkwardly, clearly trying to break the tension Luca and I brought into the room.

“Yup,” Seb says, working through some shoulder presses. “But this is my last set. Then I’m going home to bed. Max has me and Adão in the cage tomorrow, gotta be well rested.”

My eyes snap to him in the mirror as panic hits me like a fucking truck. Max just told me we’d be getting in the cage soon, but hearing that Seb and Adão are sparring *tomorrow* makes it so… real. I should be doing that too. I should be planning my week around specific goals for this fight and targeting those in sparring, not doing simple fucking drills over and over again to build confidence in something I am fucking *meant* to do. In the one thing I fucking live for.

My eyes once again find Luca as he silently completes his reverse lunges, and his gaze briefly flicks towards me.

Now he’s really fucking pissing me off.

He’s not even going to talk to anyone? I understand that his parents are getting to him, and it’s a lot to deal with. But if he won’t let me help him, he at least needs to help himself. Instead, he’s apparently going to do a complete one-eighty and just shut down. And as much as I don’t want to admit it… right now, I need him. His stupid fucking jokes are annoying but he’s the only one that can get me out of my head. And without him… I’m getting deeper and deeper.

I try my hardest to zone out and ignore Rosa, Elijah, and Seb as they wrap up their workouts and talk about their training this week. But I can't. As I listen to them talk about everything I can't do, the panic and anger grows until I can hardly fucking stand it anymore.

I toss my weights on the rack a little too forcefully and rub a hand over my face with a sigh, feeling ready to fucking explode.

"Sorry, Ty," Elijah says, and I turn to face him. He looks guilty and apologetic, and Rosa is watching me with concern.

Fuck. Now I'm taking everyone else down with me.

"No." I shake my head, blowing out a breath. "I'm just… my progress is too slow, and I'm frustrated with myself. Not you."

Luca finally turns towards us, his eyes finding mine with an incredulous look on his face.

"I can't imagine how hard it is," Elijah says. "But we didn't mean to–"

"No." Luca holds a hand up to stop Elijah, while staring directly at me. "Don't apologize to him when he's being a grumpy asshole and can't admit he's actually making progress."

My eyebrows lift in surprise. "*I'm* being the grumpy asshole?" I gesture to him with a scoff. "You haven't said a fucking word since you came in here because you can't deal with your shit. As usual, you're not taking anything seriously and now it's blowing up in your face. At least I'm fucking trying."

"Right, but it's never fucking good enough, is it?" Luca asks, stepping closer. "You think *I* can't deal with my shit? Look in the fucking mirror."

"Ok." Rosa steps into the space between Luca and I, putting her hands up. "I get it, it's a difficult time. But come on, guys, don't add to each other's stress."

I stare back at Luca as his eyes drop from mine and he sighs. Defeat seems to join his frustration, and sadness creeps in to join mine.

"It's fine," I mutter, turning away from Rosa and Luca to grab another set of weights from the rack.

"Do you want us to stay?" Seb asks, cautiously watching us as he hesitantly picks up his water bottle and phone from the bench. "I can chill out here for a bit longer."

"No, it's alright," Luca says, heading back to his area. But he looks back at me before he picks up his weights. "I can love and hate this fucker at the same time."

I huff out a breath as I lean over the workout bench and start in on my rows.

“Ok…” Elijah says uneasily. “Well… don’t stay too long.”

Rosa nods, grabbing her stuff as well. “Do something fun tonight. You both deserve it.”

I give them a little nod to hopefully ease their fear of leaving Luca and I here alone, and Rosa gives me a soft smile.

“Have a good night,” Luca says, smiling at them as they leave. But once they’re gone, his smile falls.

As we finish our workout in complete silence, I try my hardest to ignore my frustration and Luca’s attitude. Rosa is right. Tension is high, and it’s not going to do either of us any good if we let it get to us. We shouldn’t be at each other’s throats like this, even if we’re apparently pissing each other off.

But when I’m on my last cooldown stretch and Luca grabs his towel and water, I can’t ignore it anymore. Because he’s heading straight for the locker room.

Oh, fuck no.

I quickly follow him, stopping in the middle of the now empty gym. “Where the fuck are you going?”

He stops and turns to face me. “You can’t be fucking serious. You actually want to get in the ring right now?”

My fists clench at my sides as I try to control my anger. “Yeah. I do.”

His eyes close as he sighs and he runs a hand over his face.

We’re both silent for a moment, until desperation rises within me. “You said we would,” I say, the words coming out softer and more pleading than I intended.

His gaze meets mine again, and I’m surprised to see just how dull his eyes are. He holds my gaze for a moment longer before he mutters, “Fuck,” and heads to the glove locker.

And as he yanks the door open and pulls out wraps and gloves, a familiar feeling washes over me. A feeling I haven’t had in a long time, and one that is very unsettling.

I feel like a burden.

My whole life has been spent trying to prove my worth to people who were forced to take care of me. But it never worked, and they all left me. As a result, I gave up on myself and almost fucked up my entire life. But when

I found MMA, I also found a sense of value and purpose I've never had before. It's been the only thing that has ever made me feel good about myself.

Until Luca.

And now, with every failure in the ring, I feel my worth decreasing and like I'm losing the most important part of me. And Luca is now forced to take care of me.

And I don't want him to leave me too.

I climb into the ring after him, and as I wrap my hands I try to push those thoughts down and just focus on this moment. I can do this. I *need* to do this.

"What do you want to do?" Luca asks, looking down at his glove as he fastens it.

"Spar," I say immediately.

He lifts his eyes to mine. "Dude, you should probably just drill for tonight–"

"I said fucking spar," I snap, as the emotions bubble over once again. I can't keep doing drills. I need to just fucking do this and finally prove to myself, and everyone else, that I can.

Because I can't lose everything that matters to me.

Luca's brows draw together slightly as he seems to consider protesting again. But instead, he sighs and holds out his glove.

My heart rate increases as I strap my gloves on and take a deep breath. Then I step towards him, tap his glove, and get into my stance.

I can do this.

Immediately, I step in and deliver a jab to Luca. He easily blocks it and returns a jab onto my guard, then his eyes flick to mine like he's checking in and gauging my response. But we're not fucking drilling today, and there's no fucking time for that.

I go right in for a combo on him, starting with a left hook to the ribs, another body shot on the right, and a jab-cross to his head. He grunts and steps back, his eyes flashing as he takes in a deep breath. My heart is thrashing as I tighten my guard and wait, needing him to get on with it and do what he needs to do.

His eyes drop to my gloves as he closes in on me, coming in with a jab-jab-straight right punch. I block each one, and when he goes for a right kick as well, I lower my arms to block it. But as he lifts his gloves, and my guard

isn’t up and solid yet, the urge to step backwards takes over. Even though I know I can block it, and I have time if he goes in for another hit, being open like this is an unsettling feeling.

I enter the space between us again with a left foot jab, then a jab-cross to his head to distract him so he lifts his arms and I can land a left hook kick to his ribs.

Luca gives his head a little shake, and immediately returns with a straight right.

And I fucking flinch.

“Fuck!” I turn away from him and drop my gloves, blowing out a large breath as I close my eyes and try to get my shit together.

“Look, tonight is not a good night to do this. Let’s just–”

“No.” I turn around to face him again. “I’m fucking doing this tonight.”

Luca cocks an eyebrow at me. “Why?”

“What the fuck do you mean, why?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him. “I have two fucking weeks to–”

“Yeah, two weeks,” he says simply. “So why this big push *tonight*?”

I lift my glove, pointing it towards Max’s empty office as I stare back at him in disbelief. “Did you not fucking hear Max earlier? I need to be sparring this week, and we need to get in the cage soon. But this fucking *fear* has me in a fucking choke hold and I can’t fucking do that!”

Luca sighs with a nod. “Yeah, I know. But, fuck. You’ve been making progress, and quickly. Why can’t you fucking see that?”

“It’s not–”

“Not good enough?” he asks, tilting his head. He scoffs when I don’t answer. “Yeah, of course. If it’s not absolutely perfect, and you can’t control every aspect of it, it’s not good enough. You *still* can’t just take a fucking second to appreciate the steps you’ve taken and the achievements you’ve made. You’re just always pushing, and always seeking that control. Well, guess what? You don’t have it. And you don’t fucking need it.”

Those words hit me like a fucking knife to the chest. I do fucking need it. Because without it, I’m clearly failing.

I glare back at him. “Yeah? And what about you then?”

His eyes darken. “What about me?”

“You want to talk about control? Then maybe you need to fucking take some.” I take a step closer to him. “You’re letting your parents control you, and you’re just ignoring it. You say everything you do now is for yourself,

and it has to make you happy. So, what's different about this situation with your parents then? Why are you letting them get to you, when you could just tell them to fuck off?"

His jaw tics as anger flashes in his eyes. "It's obvious you've never had parents."

My vision tunnels as rage takes over, and the only thing I can do is step forward and punch him hard in the face.

"The fuck!" Luca yells as he stumbles backwards, bringing his glove up to his face.

I just stare back at him as the anger rolls through me, and I let it do what it needs to do. Enough words have been spoken. *This* is how we communicate, and he needs to start fucking talking.

"Hit me," I say, keeping my arms at my sides.

Luca scoffs as he drops his glove from his face. "I'm not going to–"

I step into him again with a straight punch to his face, but he raises his arm just in time.

"*Hit. Me*." I drop my guard again and glare at him.

But he just stares back at me as his jaw tics, and he lowers his gloves.

"I said fucking *hit me*!" I come at him with a combo, getting him again in the face before he can block me, and I back him into the corner of the ring.

When I back off him and lower my gloves again, his eyes are on fire. He looks like he's about to explode.

So I need to make that happen.

"Or are you going to let me walk all over you too?"

The force of his glove on my cheekbone sends a zing of electricity straight through me, and my body lights the fuck up. Like life has just been breathed into my body after being vacant and void for so long. My arms immediately lift as my body reacts, and the only thing I can think of is to return the hit.

I go at him with a straight right, which he blocks and then lands a push kick right to my stomach, pushing me back so he can move out of the corner.

And I don't fight it, stepping back easily so I can let him come at me. I parry his jab and catch a glove to the side of the head as I go in for a low left hook.

He grunts from the force of the blow to his ribs, but quickly takes advantage of me in a low position, landing an uppercut to my chin, then grabs the back of my neck and brings his knee up to my ribs.

I manage to duck out of his grasp and give him a jab and right hand, setting up a crescent kick. When he sees my right hip turn, he moves to block me on his left, but my kick comes at his right. My foot connects with his left arm to kick it out of the way, opening him up to land a spinning right crescent kick to his head. Which he just manages to block.

With every hit we land on each other, a weight seems to lift. Every punch and kick is a release, and each hit I take makes my soul fucking *sing*. My muscles are tingling and my mind is begging for more, as every wall comes crashing down and every door unlocks.

And as our gloves eventually fall and we step back from each other, our eyes lock.

Our deep breaths are the only sound in the empty gym as I hold his gaze, and I feel the energy shift between us.

Luca nods, blowing out a breath as he turns to leave the gym. “Come on, then.”

“Where?” I ask, watching him slip between the ropes.

He looks back at me with a soft smirk. “You know where.”

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TWENTY

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL, clear night and all the stars are out.

As we lie on the hood of my Jeep in our spot, I smile up at the moon and stars. Because how perfect is it that tonight is a last quarter moon. The one that represents a time of reflection and forgiveness, allowing a release of burdens for a new beginning.

And tonight, Ty certainly released.

We haven't said anything since we got here, taking a moment to just look up to the sky. But as I keep my eyes on the moon, I break our silence.

"Tigers subdue and execute their prey by biting the jugular vein."

Ty turns his head towards me, so I roll mine to look at him. "You came at my throat tonight."

He nods, the moonlight illuminating his face so I can see the softness in his eyes. "You came at mine."

I nod as well, regret from my words to him burrowing deeper. "Yeah."

We hold each other's gaze for a moment longer before we both turn back to the stars.

After another moment of silence, Ty sighs. "I do know I've been making progress. And I appreciate your help," he says. "But the fear wasn't just in the ring."

I turn again to look at him, but he keeps his eyes up on the sky.

"I still feel like I'm nothing without MMA." He then turns his head to me. "Or you."

My brow furrows. "Did you think you were going to lose me?"

Ty nods slightly. “I needed to get better, so you didn’t have to take care of me anymore. So you wouldn’t leave, too.”

My heart sinks as I piece this all together. No one has ever taken care of him. Everyone who should have loved him, abandoned him. And now the regret I feel at bringing his lack of family into our fight is overwhelming.

“I didn’t just go for the vein,” I say. “I executed.”

Ty huffs a breath with a slight shake of his head, turning back to the stars. “No. It’s true. I don’t know what it’s like to have parents, so who am I to tell you what to do.”

I sigh and turn back to the stars as well. “It’s just so fucking complicated.”

“How?” Ty asks softly.

I think on this for a moment, unsure how to even make sense of it myself. “I don’t know. We don’t have a great relationship,” I say. “But at the same time, I love them. And they love me, and want the best for me. They just go about it in all the wrong ways and can’t *listen*. It’s not like everything is bad with them… but I don’t know how to find a balance between the good, and the intense pressure they put on me.” I blow out a breath and let my eyes travel to the moon again as my rambling thoughts actually start to make a bit of sense to me. “I guess, in a way, I worry that if I fight back too hard, I lose the love I do get from them, and risk affecting my relationship with my sisters.” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and shake my head. “I guess fear got its hooks in me too.”

Ty remains quiet as he lets me work through these thoughts, and everything becomes a bit clearer.

“My dad’s text just sent me over the edge tonight. I was really hoping they would change their perspective on my choices when I came out here, and see just how serious I am about MMA, since words don’t seem to do it. But they just seem to be trying even harder to force me into an ideal reflection of them.” Another sigh escapes me. “And the more they try, the more I feel like a complete failure in their eyes.” I turn my head towards Ty, and he does the same. “I guess we’ve both been struggling with that feeling.”

He nods. “I guess so.”

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips. “But it ain’t about how hard you hit. It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me. “You’re quoting Rocky?”

I nod, letting my smile take over as I lift my hand and mime walking up stairs with my fingers.

He lets out a little chuckle and turns away again. But I keep my eyes on him. He says he doesn't know how to be in a relationship, and to help and support me. But actually, he's doing a pretty damn good job.

"I know you've been trying to help," I say. "And I haven't made that easy. I just don't know what to do either."

He nods, looking to me again. "I get it." His eyes flick between mine. "I'll help you ignore it until after the fight. But then, you have to deal with it."

I nod as well. "I know."

"And if I can help, I will."

I smile with a soft nod, then we bring our attention back to the night sky. I let my eyes trail over the stars as silence once again falls over us. But my smile falls and I wince slightly.

"My face hurts."

Ty chuckles and I bring my eyes to him, a smile spreading across his face as he turns his head to me. "Mine too."

And now I don't care if it hurts. A wide smile spreads across my face as I take in his happiness. My fucking Tiger is back.

"You know what the problem was, right?" I ask.

He eyes me, and I chuckle.

"You were thinking too much. As usual." I nudge him with my elbow, and he pulls away from me with a huff. "But you finally found a release."

He shakes his head. "I got angry."

I shrug. "Same thing."

He looks into my eyes and smiles softly. "I think the only thing that truly has me in a choke hold… is you."

I reach over to grasp the side of his face with my hand and press my lips to his. And as he pulls me closer, I let him take everything he needs.

The fear, anxiety, anger and frustration that has ruled us over the past couple months is finally released as we stay locked in a heated kiss. Things got messy tonight, but we needed it. And now, we can have some fucking fun.

I lower my hand, pushing it into Ty's sweatpants and grasp his hardening cock. He moans against my lips and I take it all, deepening our kiss even more. And as pain shoots up my cheek and jaw from the pressure

of his lips against mine, I don't fucking care. That pain is a very welcome reminder that things are back to how they should be, and we're going to be ok.

Ty's fingers slip inside my waistband, and he grabs my ass. "I wish I could fuck this ass right now," he says against my lips.

"You can," I say with a smile.

He pulls back to look into my eyes, and I chuckle.

"It's your lucky day," I say. "I just happened to buy lube yesterday, and it's still in the Jeep."

The corner of his lips tilt up as he pushes me back, and gestures with a sexy tilt of his head for me to go get it.

I hop off the hood of the Jeep and grab the lube from the back seat. And as I come back to Ty, he's sitting on the edge of the hood, watching me. And damn, the fucker is hot. His hair is a perfect mess, and his dark eyes are boring into me as I approach him. He looks *ravenous* and I am fucking ready for it.

I place the lube on the hood next to him and move between his legs. "You can fuck me this time," I say, running a hand over his hard cock in his sweats. "But next time, I need to get back up in that ass."

His eyes sparkle in the moonlight as his fingers slide through my hair. Then he grips tightly, yanking my head back as he looks into my eyes. "Only if you're good."

A breath escapes me as I close in on him and our lips meet again. I kiss him with a frantic need, letting him keep his grip in my hair. Because the promise of a "good boy" makes me fucking feral, and I *need it.*

I forcefully push him onto his back, and he snarls at me as he starts to get up. But before he can do that, I pull his sweats down and take his cock into my mouth.

"Fuck," he mutters as he relaxes back onto the hood of the Jeep, watching me as I take him all the way in.

His moans mix with the soft sounds of the breeze rustling the trees around us as I suck him, and his hand once again finds my head. I grip his hips tight, licking and sucking and letting the taste of his precum urge me on. His groans grow louder as his grasp in my hair tightens, and my need to have him in my ass is unbearable.

And as if he's reading my mind, he suddenly sits up, pushes me back and hops off the Jeep.

“Ah, so you want–” I start, but he grabs me and turns me around.

He jams his knee into the back of mine so they buckle, then quickly wraps his arm around my neck, pulling me into a choke.

He holds me tight against him as he brings his lips to my ear. “That’s it. Fucking take it.”

I resist the urge to fight back as he pulls tighter, and I try to take a deep breath.

His arm around my neck stays firmly in place as he lowers his other hand to my sweatpants, pushing them down over my ass. “Get the lube.”

My hand snaps out to grab it, and I have the top popped before he can even hold his fingers out.

As I pour the lube onto his fingers, he nudges my feet wider, and my heart thunders. While dominant Ty is nothing new, I’m surprised to find that I’m fucking *eager* for it. I *want* him to control me, take from me and show me just how fucking ruthless he can be.

A moan escapes me as his lubed fingers rub over my hole and a tingle rushes through my entire body. Ty’s arm is still around my neck, and I drop my head back against his shoulder.

“How many fingers can you take, Mitchell?” he asks, pushing a finger inside me and running his tongue up my neck.

I groan as he moves his finger in and out of my ass. “More,” I pant.

Ty chuckles, pushing a second finger into me.

“Oh, god,” I moan, pushing my ass back into his hand. He continues to fuck my hole with his fingers, and with each thrust into me, the need for even more grows.

I bring my hand to my dick, but before I can stroke it even once, Ty releases my neck and pushes me face down onto the hood of the Jeep.

“Motherfucker,” I hiss as my sore cheekbone hits the hood.

I try to push back against him, but his hand lands on the middle of my back, keeping me there. And just as I’m about to roll over, he pushes a third finger into my ass.

“Jesus Christ,” I grunt as my head falls back down and that rude-as-fuck move is completely forgotten.

Pleasure takes over as I once again fall victim to the desire to let him take me. Ty fingers my ass hard and fast while I fall apart, my cock literally weeping and my body writhing underneath the pressure of him pressing me to the hood of the Jeep.

“Fuck,” Ty mutters with a heavy breath as his hand lifts from my back and moves to my cock. He rubs his thumb over the head, then brings his hand to his mouth to lick my precum with a moan.

I release a breath and shake my head as I stare at him over my shoulder. “You better hurry up and fuck me, or I’ll be coming without you.”

He smirks at me as he pulls his fingers from my ass and grabs the lube. I watch him as he lubes up his cock, and I push up onto my elbows.

But he moves quickly, forcing me back down as his hand lands on my back again.

He glares at me. “I thought you were going to be good?”

The need to turn around and take him down rises once more, but as I look back at him again and see the fierce look on his face, with the moonlight washing over him and the stars in the sky behind him…

Well, fuck me.

And that’s exactly what he does.

As he slams into me, a wave of intense pleasure pushes every other thought out of my mind. I completely lose myself to him as he fucks me, and I let him consume me. After everything we have been through tonight, this is our ultimate release. And it’s rising fast.

“Fuck, Ty,” I mutter as I drop my hand to my cock. “I’m going to come.”

“Come,” he pants, thrusting into me even faster. “I’m close.”

I stroke my cock as he pounds my ass, the need to explode getting closer and closer. He doesn’t let up as my body trembles, the tingles rush up my legs, and I groan loudly as I come all over the front of my Jeep.

“Oh, fuck,” Ty grunts as he slams into me a few more times, then pulls out.

I look over my shoulder as he comes on my ass with a groan, and I try to catch my breath. As he comes down from his high, his eyes stay glued to my ass and a small smile tugs at his lips.

He leans over, running his tongue over his cum as his eyes meet mine. As he swallows, he smirks. Then he bites my ass. Hard.

“Good boy.”

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TWENTY-ONE

"I DON'T KNOW which took it harder last night, my ass or my face."

I chuckle as Luca shimmies his hips in discomfort and pulls the gym door open. "Looks like your ass," I say as I follow him inside.

He glances over his shoulder at me as his eyes roam over my face. "And it looks like I need to make your ass match your face."

I cock an eyebrow at him, but also can't ignore the way my heart seems to skip a beat. "Weird way to put it, but alright."

We reach the locker room door, and just as Luca reaches out to push it, it opens and we come face to face with Elijah.

His eyes widen as they flick between us, hope etched into his features.

Luca laughs and reaches out to pat his shoulder. "All good, bud."

He sighs in relief. "Thank fuck," he mutters. "I don't do well with tension." He dramatically unrolls his wrap and pushes past us as he starts wrapping his hand. "You guys are going to give me an ulcer."

But I see the small smile playing on his lips as he heads for the ring.

We head into the locker room to get changed to roll, and excitement flows through me. Even though we're not sparring in the ring or the cage today, I'm looking forward to letting it all out on the mats. I finally feel 100%, with absolutely nothing holding me back.

I shove my clothes into my locker and close the door, turning to face Luca. As he pulls his shirt off, my eyes immediately drop to his ribs and feelings of relief and gratitude take over as I keep my gaze on the moon and stars tattoo. Letting my fears and frustrations out, both in the ring and under the stars, was exactly what I needed. And Luca needed it too.

He closes his locker door and turns to face me. “Oh my god.”

My eyes snap up to his. “What?”

A huge smile spreads across his face. “I did it.”

My brow furrows as I watch his smile grow even bigger, and just wait. He’ll get to it eventually.

“I trained you. You had your Rocky moment.” He lifts his fists in the air, and I roll my eyes.

“You think *you* did that?” I ask, heading for the door into the gym.

“Fuck yeah. I mean, there are still a couple stairs left,” Luca says as he falls into step beside me. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about cuddles, and you still owe me a nice dinner. But you’re basically at the top. A breakthrough in the ring *and* in communication in one night? I’m a goddamn miracle worker.”

I shoot him a look as we walk towards the mats where Max is waiting for us. “Are you forgetting that you weren’t communicating either?”

He waves a hand in the air with a scoff. “Please. We’ve been through this.”

For fuck’s sake.

“Hey, guys,” Max looks up at us with a smile as we approach him. “You ready to…” he trails off as we stop before him and his eyes narrow.

As he takes in the swelling and bruising on our faces, an uneasy feeling settles. Dammit… of course he’s going to be pissed at this.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Max says, his tone laced with anger. “*Again*? What the fuck, guys? I thought this shit would end now that you’re together. You have a fight in less than three weeks now, and you think going at each other is a good fucking idea?”

I take a deep breath, ready to explain everything to him. But Luca just chuckles.

“Yeah, actually,” he says with a shrug. “Because we *did* go at each other.”

Max looks between us, clearly fuming as he seems to be formulating a response to that. But suddenly, his eyes snap to me. And as they roam over my face, the anger in him dissipates.

I give him a small smile with a slight shrug. “No issues here.”

He continues to stare back at me for another moment before he breathes out a laugh and shakes his head. “You guys are fucked.”

“Well, I was,” Luca says, drawing our attention to him. He then points his thumb at me. “He was last time.”

I roll my eyes with a sigh, turning back to Max and giving him a nod. “I’m ready.”

“Best news ever.” He smiles back at me, but then quickly drops it, glancing between Luca and I again. “But for fuck’s sake, learn a better way to deal with your issues.”

Luca glances at me in confusion. “Why? This seems to work pretty well.”

Can’t argue with that.

Max sighs and shakes his head. “Whatever. Alright, let’s roll. Show me what you got. And Luca, remember to control the hip and tighten up your sweeps.”

“Oh, I can control that hip alright,” Luca mutters with a smirk as we step on the mat.

“Really?” I ask. “Because I’m pretty sure I controlled it last night.”

Luca's mouth drops open as his eyes widen. “Oh my god.” He smiles with a nod of approval. “Fuck yeah you did.”

“My god.” Max rubs a hand over his face. “Just go already.”

With a chuckle, Luca holds out his fist and I tap it.

And immediately, the asshole drops low using his speed to rush my knees, and takes me right down to the mat.

I hit it with a grunt, knowing that was fucking payback for me taking his knees out last night.

“Good, Luca,” Max says from the side of the mat.

Fuck that.

I know he’s going to try to move into mount, so I quickly pull my knees up to keep him back. When he tries to position himself to my side, I catch him with my leg around his waist and pull him into closed guard.

His eyes are full of determination as his hands quickly find my hips and he applies pressure in an attempt to break my guard. And I have to bite back a smile. Because it’s exactly what he should do, and he’s close to getting it. But not close enough.

I grab his wrist with one hand, his elbow with the other, and pull it to my opposite side as I shift my hips out from under him. And before he can even try to pull his arm back, I reach around the back of his neck, passing

his wrist to that hand to lock his arm against his chest. Then I grab his leg and roll him over, so I'm in mount position.

"Nice switch back sweep, Ty," Max calls, and Luca grunts.

Luca lifts his arms, but I lower myself against him so he can't get his hands between us. But he uses his fucking hips to bump me up and create space between my stomach and his chest, sliding his arm in. Then he bridges, pushing his forearm against me so he can shift and move his hips out from under me.

But as he's on his side underneath me, I slide my hand behind his neck so I can change this conversation and start a sweep on him instead.

Except he lifts his knee to place his foot on my hip, and slides his hand under that leg to bring my ankle to his shoulder. Motherfucker put us in single x position. I assume he's going to kick up right off the bat, so I bring my hand down to block it. But he grabs my wrist, drops his foot from my hip, and pulls my arm down while pushing my leg, fucking sweeping me. Effortlessly.

I look up at him from my back as he sits over my hips, and we both pause. And I take this moment to really notice how fucking *good* this feels. Nothing is getting in my way, and I am in this, completely.

Luca smirks down at me, then gives me a little nod.

I lift my arm, punching Luca's ribs as I roll him over in a sweep and move into side control.

"Guys, no," Max yells. "Just rolling!"

Luca's elbow finds the side of my head as he angles towards me to escape, and the pain from his blows on me last night only urges me on.

And as I get a foot to the stomach in a forceful kick to keep me from taking guard again, the need to go all out takes over.

"Are you fucking listening?" I hear Max's voice from somewhere close by, but I don't care.

I manage a hit to his jaw and a knee to Luca's side as we continue to roll, and he gets another elbow on me. And even though we're not hitting with the force we would if we had gloves on… it feels fucking amazing.

Eventually we end up back in mount position with me on top, and my hands on the mat on either side of Luca's head as I stare down at him. We're both breathing heavy, as we hold each other's gaze and the thrill of the fight fuels an intense need in us both.

"Ty, Luca," Max's frustrated voice sounds beside us.

But I can’t take my eyes away from Luca’s.

His hand lifts, and he wraps it around the back of my neck. And as I let him pull me down to him, our lips meet and I kiss him with everything I have.

His fingers dig into my back as my hand slides up his side and around his throat, angling his chin back so I can kiss him deeper. I push my hips into him, and his arms wrap around me, holding tight as he rolls us so he’s on top of me now.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Max mutters.

But we don’t stop.

Because I’m fucking *celebrating*.

And as I hear Rosa’s excited cheer from nearby, I laugh against Luca’s lips.

Then I pull him into an armbar.

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TWENTY-TWO

"LUCA!"

I pause as I walk past Mrs. Weatherbee's office, and my heart picks up its pace as she smiles and gestures for me to come inside. She looks happy… and this may be the only time I've ever been excited to be called to the principal's office.

"Hi." I smile as I enter her office, and she stands to close the door behind me.

"I won't keep you long, I know you have a class soon," she says. "But I just wanted to say your application and interview for the open Phys. Ed. position was well received." She smiles widely. "And you can expect an official offer for the position in your inbox by the end of the week."

"Seriously?" I ask, lifting my hands to my head. "Oh wow. Yes, yes, yes! I'll take it!"

Mrs. Weatherbee laughs with a nod. "Noted. Once you receive the offer and officially accept the position, we'll get you all sorted out. But for now," she opens the door again, "let me be the first to officially welcome you to the Westmount Elementary team."

I could fucking *hug* her. But I'm pretty sure that's inappropriate, so I hold out a fist for her to bump instead. Which she does with another laugh.

"Thank you so much," I say as I step out of her office. "Seriously, I've wanted this so bad."

"Well, you got it." She chuckles as I fist pump the air. "Have a good class."

“You know I will!” I point at her with a grin as I turn and head towards the gym, on cloud fucking nine.

I briefly consider running to tell Dan, but I don’t. At least not yet.

There’s someone I want to tell first, before anyone else.

Ty and I have had a fucking *fantastic* week, and this is just the sprinkles on the fucking cupcake. First we fucked each other up, then he fucked me under the stars, *then* we’ve had some sick spars in the ring and on the mats… and now, I have a permanent, full-time teaching position at the school I love.

And with Dallas in two weeks, I feel fucking unstoppable.

I’m jamming out to my tunes and jogging the track as I wait for Ty to arrive. And each time I pass the cage, my excitement grows. Ty and I are sparring in there today, and we’re both fucking pumped for it.

And just as “Eye of the Tiger” starts playing in my earbuds, Ty walks into the gym looking hot as fuck in his grease-stained work pants, and backwards hat. Seriously, could this day get any better?

I jog over to him, pulling my earbuds out and falling into step next to him as he heads towards the locker room. “Hey,” I say, catching my breath.

“Hey,” he says, glancing at me.

I eye him, waiting for more. But we clearly still have work to do in that department.

“And how was your day?” I ask with a little wave of my hand towards him, urging him to answer.

“Good,” he says with a little nod.

I slap a hand to his chest so he stops and I stare at him, waiting.

He sighs, shoving my hand off his chest and continuing to make his way to the locker room. “It was busy. But had a motorcycle in today, so it was good.”

“Wow, impressive.” I nod with a smile and follow him into the locker room. “That was like,” I lift my hand, counting on my fingers, “thirteen words. That might be your new personal best.”

He shoots me a look and drops his bag on the bench.

“Now you ask me how my day was,” I say, holding back my smile as I cross my arms and let my eyes drop to his ass.

Ty glances over his shoulder at me as he pulls his locker door open. “Or you could just tell me.”

“No,” I shake my head, “you need to ask.”

“No,” he shakes his head as well, pulling his shorts out of his bag, “I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I fucking don’t.”

“You want to go backwards down those fucking stairs?” I tilt my head. “Because I can make sure it hurts.”

“Oh my god.” Ty turns to glare at me. “How was your fucking day?”

I shrug. “It was alright.”

Fire burns in his eyes as his jaw tics, and he turns back to his locker.

But I chuckle, leaning back against my locker opposite his. “I got the job.”

He turns again to face me, his eyes widening slightly. Then his lips slowly tilt up in a lop-sided smile. “That’ll show them.”

“Fucking right it will,” I say with a nod.

And I have to smile to myself at that thought. Because I accepted this job without one worry about what my parents are going to say or do. It was completely for me, and they don’t get to have a fucking say. I consider that a pretty big win.

“Any calls from them today?” Ty asks, pulling his shirt off.

“Not since that text from my dad,” I say, watching his bare, muscular abs flex as he pushes his pants down so he’s in just his black boxers.

But before he can pull on his fight shorts, I stop him. “Wait.”

He looks up at me, and then to the door. “No,” he says with a shake of his head and moves again to step into his shorts.

“I said fucking wait,” I snap, as I pull my locker door open. “I got you something.”

As I turn around with a bag, Ty eyes me with worry.

“What…” he says cautiously.

“Here.” I smile and hold the bag out to him.

Ty tentatively reaches out to take it, and peers inside. Then his eyes lift to mine with amusement.

“Put them on, Tiger.”

He reaches into the bag and pulls out the tiger print boxers, holding them up with a question in his eyes.

“I actually wanted to get you tiger fight shorts, but for some reason you’re super attached to your boring plain black shorts and refuse to broaden your horizons with *color*.” I shake my head with a scoff. “So, this is the only other thing you can take with you into the cage, and no one will ever know. Except me, of course.”

Ty silently drops his eyes to the boxers in his hand.

I smile as I watch him. “Because tigers fuck up d-holes.”

A breath of laughter escapes him, and he lifts his eyes to me again. “They do.”

“Put them on,” I tell him again, stepping closer.

“Now?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow at me.

“Yeah, fucking now. Come on,” I motion for him to hurry the fuck up, “I’m getting hard just seeing you hold them.”

With a roll of his eyes, he drops his boring-ass underwear and steps into the fucking amazing tiger boxers.

“Oh my god,” I mutter, reaching out to run my fingers over his hip. “They’re fucking magical.”

He bats my hand away. “Don’t make me regret this.”

I smile, lifting my eyes to his. “You won’t.”

My hand cups his dick, and I rub him over his boxers as I get fully fucking hard in my shorts. And as he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth, and his hand grabs my hip, I know it’s fucking on.

Ty pulls me closer, and I bring my lips to his neck as I push my hips against his.

“Fuck,” he mutters as he feels me hard against him.

I lick and suck the skin under his ear as he grabs my hips and grinds into me, both of us now ready and fucking desperate for this. I pull back and bring my lips to his, and his tongue immediately sweeps into my mouth.

His hands are roaming my body as we kiss, and as his thumb grazes over my nipple, I groan.

“Quiet,” Ty says against my lips.

I smirk, pulling back from him just enough to slide a hand into his tiger boxers and grasp his cock. “Why?”

His eyes dart to the locker room door, and I chuckle.

“Everyone is already out there training.” I tilt my head as I observe him. “You’re not nervous are you, Tiger?”

He snaps his eyes back to me, and they flash with fervor in the face of a challenge. “The only thing I’m worried about is people seeing me in fucking tiger boxers.”

I smile, stroking his cock faster. “Better come fast then.”

His finger hooks the waistband of my shorts, and he pulls me closer to him. He unfastens my shorts, pulls my cock out, and pushes his boxers down just enough to free himself too.

“Make us both come,” he says in a low voice against my lips.

“If you insist,” I breathe out. And as I wrap my hand around the both of us, feeling his hard cock against mine, I know I’m not going to last long.

Ty tilts my chin up as his lips land on my neck, and the warm, wet sensation of his tongue sends tingles down my spine as I move my hand up and down both of our cocks.

“Fuck,” I mutter, increasing my speed.

“More,” Ty groans against my neck, as his hands run up my sides and his fingers dig into my ribs.

The pressure is quickly building within me as I jerk us harder and faster, and Ty’s grip on me tightens even more.

Suddenly, we hear voices from outside the locker room door, and we both freeze. I turn my head towards the door as I hear Seb and Noah’s muffled voices nearby.

Ty’s hand lifts and his fingers sink into my hair. He grips tightly, turning my head back towards him. “You’re not nervous, are you?”

My eyes narrow as I jerk my head out of his grasp and slide my free hand up to his throat, pushing him forcefully back into the locker.

He grunts and glares at me, but my lips are on his before he can do anything.

I’m frantically jerking us as we fall into a messy and desperate kiss, and the pressure inside me is building and ready to release.

“You going to come?” I ask Ty, my lips still pressed against his.

“Yeah,” he pants.

And as his hand slides up my side, and his thumb once again finds my nipple, I’m fucking done for. After a few more strokes of my hand on our cocks, I’m coming hard, panting against Ty’s lips as his thumb flicks my

nipple and he groans. I drop my eyes to watch as we both fall over the edge, and Ty's stomach is covered in an impressive amount of cum.

My hand slides up his stomach, gathering as much cum as I can before I hold it up to my mouth and lick. Ty watches, and his eyes stay glued to my lips as I lean into him. And as I push my cum-covered tongue into his mouth, he moans and wraps a hand around the back of my head to take as much as he possibly can.

After we clean up and take a moment to recover, we leave the locker room and head towards the cage. Because now, it's time to fight.

And the entire walk there, I keep my eyes on Ty's ass, smiling because I know what's under those black shorts.

This really is the best day ever.

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TWENTY-THREE

LUCA HAS me pushed up against the side of the cage in a body lock, and I have him in an underhook as he tries to attack my legs. But just as I'm about to pull my arm out to hit him, he quickly changes his plan and shifts my weight to my back leg. His left leg hooks around my right as he rotates me away from the side of the cage and takes me to the floor in a leg hook takedown.

"Yes, Luca!" I hear the cheers from our teammates from outside the cage.

And while, yes, that was a great takedown… No. He's not getting away with that.

Luca doesn't move into mount position, instead staying up on his feet in a crouch over my hips to prevent a sweep. But I still have a hold on his neck. I get a hit on the side of his head, and he grunts as I pull his head towards mine to force him onto his knees over my hips.

"Get it, Ty!" I hear Rosa yell and the others all cheer.

Luca lands a fist to the side of my head, then manages to slide his arm under my neck as he attempts to set up a choke or armbar. I slide my arm up to the side of my face to prevent him from getting his other arm in place, but he quickly elbows my head with that arm instead.

"One minute!" Max calls out, and that drives me to sweep this fucker. No way is this spar ending in a tap from me.

I manage to get my arm between us and rotate my hips enough to roll over and get my knees inside his legs. I lift his leg with my feet to take his balance and push him back, giving me time to move into butterfly guard.

But he pinches his knees to bring my feet together, and ducks his head, pushing it into my chest under my chin to lay me on my back again.

“Yeah, Luca! Keep him down!”

Nope.

Before he can bring his weight fully over me, I land a body shot to his ribs and see an opportunity to pull my leg out. This may not end well but… I’m not supposed to think so much, right? So, I go for it.

With my leg out from under him, I wrap it around his waist, grab his arm, and roll him over with force. And since he didn’t see that coming, he lands flat on his back, giving me time to pop up to my feet.

“Time!”

I look down at Luca on his back as he stares up at me, and a smile forms on his lips.

Who would have thought that he would want to fight on the ground and I would want us standing. What a shift from where we started.

“Nice,” Max nods, hanging his fingers on the cage and smiling at us. “I’d say we’re ready.”

I smile back at him and nod. With just one week until Dallas, and this spar being our last until then, I’m feeling good about it. Usually I don’t like the week leading up to a fight, when workouts become lighter, the sparring stops, and it’s not enough to keep me focused and calm. But this time, I don’t care. Because knowing I’m not sitting this one out is all I need to keep me focused and content.

“Alright.” Max opens the cage door so Luca and I can exit. “Luca, I want you to continue drilling takedowns from standing this week. Rojas is excellent at evading takedowns, and since you want him on the ground, fucking get him there.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n.” Luca salutes him as he exits the cage and hops down the steps.

“And Ty,” Max says to me as I exit as well. “Light drills with Del this week to focus on footwork. Make sure everything is tight.”

“Got it,” I nod.

Max gives me a nod back, then turns to everyone as they gather their towels and water bottles, getting ready to head out for the day. We’ve all had a chance to spar today, and we all went hard.

“Ok, everyone knows what to do this week,” Max says. “You have one week. Train smart, start cutting your weight, and get plenty of sleep. Get out

of here."

Seb growls as he turns towards the locker room. "I'm already hungry."

"I know," Luca agrees as he wipes a towel over his face. "I think I had a dream about pizza last night. Or no, maybe it was tacos. I don't know. Either way, it was fucking delicious in dreamland."

Seb groans. "Tell me more."

I start to follow them to the locker room, internally rolling my eyes at this ridiculous conversation, when Max's hand lands on my shoulder to stop me.

And my heart drops as I turn to face him.

No… There's no way he's pulling me. I did it. It's one week out, and I'm 100%. And he *just* told me what I need to drill for this week…

His face breaks out in a huge smile. "I had no doubts."

A breath of laughter escapes me as relief flushes through my entire body. "I mean… you kinda did."

Max shakes his head with a little laugh. "Nah. I knew you'd make it. And as hard as it was to have that conversation with you, I also knew it was the push you needed. It's my job as your coach to do that, while also looking out for your safety."

I nod as a feeling of gratitude overwhelms me. "Thank you."

He nods back at me, squeezing my shoulder before he turns to head to his office.

And as I make my way towards the locker room and happy voices of my teammates, I smile.

I got this.

"Now boarding flight three-three-six-one, non-stop to Dallas."

As we all make our way into the line up, I shift my backpack on my shoulder and peer out the window at the airplane we're about to board.

And I hate to admit, even just to myself, that I feel nervous.

Not about the fight. I'm so fucking ready for that. But because I'm about to get on an airplane for the first time in my life.

“I’m so hungry I could eat Ty’s ass.”

With him.

I roll my eyes at Luca and shift my weight on my feet again, my heart beating a little faster as the line gets shorter.

“I mean, I would anyway. Don’t have to ask me twice,” Luca says, shoving his hands in his hoodie pocket and shrugging his shoulders. “But like… *right now,* I would.”

“For fuck’s sake, would you shut up?” I mutter, and Max glances over his shoulder at us with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

“Why?” Luca asks. “Aren’t you hungry?”

I turn to Adão behind me. “Want to switch seats?”

Adão laughs and Luca scoffs.

“Oh, come on,” Luca elbows me in the ribs and I side step away from him. “You wouldn’t want to miss out on the possibility of a little airplane handy would you?”

“Oh my god,” Max turns to Luca with wide eyes. “Please, do not. I’m in your row.”

Luca just chuckles and winks at me.

And I just sigh.

We make it through the gate and onto the plane, and as I get buckled in my seat next to the window, with Luca beside me and Max on his other side, I take a deep breath and look outside.

I watch as the crew loads the luggage into the plane, counting each suitcase to try to calm my apparent nerves. I had no fucking idea I was going to be this nervous to fly.

And as everyone is finally in their seats and the plane doors close, my leg starts bouncing.

Luca nudges my arm, bringing my attention to him. He gives me a quizzical look, so I rub a hand over my face and try to school my expression and calm the fuck down.

“Cut might be getting to me,” I mutter, adjusting myself in my seat.

Luca nods with a soft smile. “Yeah, me too. But after weigh-in tomorrow we can eat, hydrate and watch *Mulan*.”

The plane starts moving backwards, and my eyes slide to the window again.

“And,” Luca continues, “I have a second movie lined up, if needed. But it’s a surprise.”

I turn to face him again. “Another cartoon, I’m assuming.”

“I said it was a surprise, Tyler. Come on.” He rolls his eyes. Then smiles again. “But you could always guess.”

“I honestly have no idea what any of your movies are,” I say.

“Lies. You loved *Ratatouille*.”

“I fell asleep.”

“Yeah, because I sucked your dick so good. Leave Remy out of this.”

“Who’s Remy?”

“The rat chef.” Luca gives me an incredulous look, like this is some kind of common knowledge. “Seriously, get your shit together.”

The plane rolls onto the runway, and rumbling sounds throughout the space as we pick up speed. My hands start fidgeting in my lap as I stare out the window, and my body almost feels frozen in fear.

Until fingers slip into mine.

Luca gives my hand a squeeze, and a smile tugs at my lips as the fear floats away with the clouds.

I’ve never been out of Missouri before.

And I’m happy that I can share this journey with him.

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TWENTY-FOUR

MY EYES SWEEP over the room as we wait for weigh-in, and I try to locate my opponent, Andrew Giles. I haven't seen him yet, but we still have some time until our division weighs in.

Noah returns to his seat, as his division was up first, and happily accepts the water bottle Rosa holds out to him. "Thank god," he says as he takes a drink. And some jealousy settles in me as I watch him. I'm so fucking thirsty.

"Your guy looks chill," Seb says with his arms crossed as he observes Noah's opponent.

Rico Vargas is pacing the far wall while talking to his trainer, giving him an earful while his eyes continue to dart this way.

Noah snorts a laugh. "When he got off the scale, he asked me if I was ready for his hammer. I think he might be a bit off his rocker."

Luca turns to smirk at Noah. "Wonder which *hammer* he's referring to?"

Noah's face twists in horror and Luca and Rosa fall apart laughing.

"Hey, guys," Max sits next to Luca. "I was just talking with the officials, and apparently Rojas pulled out. Something about an old injury acting up."

My eyes snap to Luca as he tilts his head back with a sigh.

"Fuck," he says. "Please tell me they have a replacement fighter. There's no fucking way I'm not fighting tomorrow."

Max nods. "They do." But I see the worry in his eyes.

"Great," Luca nods, not picking up on Max's hesitation. "I'll take it."

Max sighs, his eyes sliding to me before he tilts his head in a gesture for us to look across the room.

Luca and I both turn to look… and I can't fucking believe what I'm seeing.

Josh Hens.

My heart pounds as I take in his smug expression when his eyes meet mine. The same look I saw in the cage three months ago before he knocked me out with a dirty, illegal knee to the back of the head.

"Josh fucking Henna?" Luca seethes next to me.

"Hens," I correct him, not taking my eyes off the fucking asshole.

Why the fuck is he here? Of all places to run into him again, it has to be in fucking Dallas, in a fight with so much riding on it. LFA officials are here, and this is where we need to showcase our ability to fight in Vegas in May. And just when I thought we were finally done with him and the effects he had on me… here he fucking is.

"You can always withdraw," Max says, drawing both mine and Luca's attention back to him.

"Fuck no," Luca says immediately.

And I have no idea how to feel about that. It's not that I don't think Luca can handle him. Of course he can. But this asshole is fucking dirty. He almost took MMA away from me completely and gave me a fear I've never had before. A fear over something I love and need. And I don't want to see something like that, or worse, happen to Luca too.

But as I look into Luca's eyes, I see that this isn't even a question. He's going to do this, and I know he's going to be ok. Because everything I once hated about him, now provides me with a sense of comfort. Luca Mitchell is a fast, agile, stubborn, reactive striker.

But now he's also a motherfucking grappler. And he's going to fucking destroy Josh Hens.

The second our hotel room door closes after we get back from weigh-in, I turn to Luca. "What's your plan?"

“Huh?” he asks, setting our food and drinks on the desk.

I just stare back at him, trying to keep my expression calm, but I feel frantic. As much as I know he’s got this… I can’t help but feel worried, and I need to know exactly what he’s thinking going into this fight.

Luca just shrugs. “Fuck him up.”

I sigh and rub a hand over my face.

He huffs out a breath of laughter and sits on the edge of the bed. “Chill. My plan is no different than it already was. I’m still facing a striker, and I’m still a striker. But I’m also a grappler now, and he’s still going to be expecting a striker, but getting a grappler, and he’s–”

“Fucking dirty,” I say, getting to the point.

“I was going to say unprepared, since he hasn’t been able to research me. But that too.” Luca shrugs again. “Have you forgotten that I can be sneaky and quick?”

I shake my head. “That’s not going to be enough.”

Luca sighs and pats the bed beside him. When I don’t move, he glares at me. “Sit down, motherfucker. Before you have a fucking stroke.”

I stay standing for a moment longer, then reluctantly sit beside him.

“Ok,” Luca says. “So, what do I need to do to beat this guy?”

I’m quiet for a moment before I shake my head. How the fuck do I even answer that?

“He takes advantage of every single moment you’re not on,” I say, looking down at my hands in my lap. “And he doesn’t care at all what the ref says or what the rules are. He’s going to do whatever the fuck he wants.”

Luca hums thoughtfully. “So… let him get disqualified and take the win?”

My eyes snap to him. “Because you get injured?”

He sighs. “No.” He shifts so he’s facing me. “But we know him better than he knows me. We know he doesn’t want to go to the ground, because he’s weak as fuck down there.”

I nod, remembering his finger to my eye and his knee to the back of my head, all when I almost had him. “On the ground is where he resorts to cheap shots, because he has no other way out of it.”

“Yeah,” Luca agrees. “So I need to be faster than him.”

“Yeah,” I say. Then I take a deep breath and turn to face him as well. “He’s probably pretty fucking pumped he’s facing a fast striker like you. So yeah, it’s a good idea to bring him down as fast as you can. But once you

have him there, you need to take every opportunity away from him, so he never gets you where he wants. You need to always be thinking, be ahead of him at all times, and completely control the fight."

"While also being quick and reactive to whatever he *will* be able to throw at me…" Luca says thoughtfully. "Sounds like a blast."

"You'll be gassed," I agree, taking in the slight flicker of worry in his eyes. "But…" I shrug, not really sure what else to add to that.

Luca nods, and his lips tilt up in a lopsided smile. "You care to lend me some of your tiger strength? I need to be fast and deadly if I'm going to take down the ultimate d-hole."

I chuckle, sliding my hand under his shirt and over the moon and stars tattoo. "You already have it."

He smiles, leaning forward to press his lips to mine in a surprisingly gentle kiss.

Then he pulls back and grins excitedly. "*Mulan* time."

"Ugh," I groan, and he hops off the bed to grab his laptop.

"Oh, shut the fuck up." He shoots me a look over his shoulder. "It's a fighting masterpiece and it's my tradition before every fight, which means it's yours now too."

"Great," I mutter as I stand up to retrieve our food and coconut water from the desk.

He sits down on the bed as I pass him his pasta, and he smiles slyly at me. "Have you guessed our second movie yet?"

"What do you think?" I ask as I sit beside him and take a drink.

His smile grows wider as he reaches for the laptop and turns it around so I can see the screen.

Rocky.

And all I can do is laugh. "Asshole."

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TWENTY-FIVE

I KEEP my hood up and my eyes down, trying to tune out the happy voices in the room with me. Adão just finished his brutal fight that went all three rounds, and it ended in a decision. He won, and he fucking deserved it.

And as much as I want to congratulate him with everyone else… I'm next.

Before every fight, I've always sat alone and quietly visualized the fight I want to go into. I form scenarios in my head, and how I would approach each one to bring this fight into my control. I imagine the feeling of a takedown and plan my attack, as well as the feeling of an attack on me and how I will defend and redirect.

But right now, I'm having a hard time doing that. Because this fight is different from any other fight I've ever been in. I'm coming back from an injury that almost ended my career, and the guy who caused that is fighting the guy I love right after me.

"Hey, Tiger."

I lift my eyes from my lap as Luca sits on the chair across from me. He's left me alone since we came in here, and I appreciate that he recognized my need for this space. But I also appreciate that he apparently recognized how it isn't going so well.

"Hey," I say, dropping my eyes again.

"Not to interrupt the broody focus ritual you got going on here, but…" he pulls his chair a bit closer to me, "show them to me."

I look up at him again with a furrowed brow. "Really?"

He nods eagerly. "Yes."

“No.”

“Come on.” He inches his fingers up my leg and under my shorts. “Just a peek.”

“Fuck off,” I say as I bat his hand away. “I have them on, you know I do.”

He smiles widely. “Fucking right you do.”

I sigh and close my eyes, wanting to forget him forcefully trying to put the tiger boxers on me just an hour ago. I was going to wear them anyway… but he was being annoying about it so I was pretty damn close to changing my mind.

“When a tiger chooses to fight,” he says in a low voice, “he can take out a d-hole in a single swipe.”

I open my eyes to meet his, and he smiles softly.

“Ty.”

We both turn to Max as he stands by the door, and he tilts his head in a gesture that it’s time to go.

I stand up, pull my hoodie off and toss it on the chair. But as I turn to leave, I pause. I look down at Luca’s soft hazel eyes peering up at me and let the comfort from his gaze settle my nagging thoughts.

Then I lean down and press my lips to his.

“Go get him, Tiger.”

This venue is huge, and the crowd is *loud*. The walk to the cage is almost overwhelming with deafening cheers, but I keep my eyes focused on the cage at the end of the walkway and try my hardest to channel my energy where it needs to be.

I reach the cage, and the ref motions for me to spread my arms so he can pat me down.

Max watches me and doesn’t say anything. Usually, he would have a pep talk lined up and give me my final instructions for this fight, but everything that needs to be said has already been said. I know exactly what to do.

“Good to go,” the ref says, stepping aside to let me into the cage.

I meet Max’s eyes and he smiles.

“Hit hard, hit fast.”

I nod. “Got it.”

Once I’m in the cage, I head for my corner… and immediately I feel at home. Everything within me seems to align as I take in the feeling of the

canvas floor on my bare feet, the lights on my skin, the sight of the crowd through the cage and the sounds of their excited cheers. The anger, anxiety, and fear I've been hanging onto for months all fades away, and the misplaced energy is now exactly where it's supposed to be. Finally, I feel *fully* awake.

As Giles enters the cage, I hop on my feet and shake out my arms. I take in everything about him as he walks to his corner, studying his movements and energy. He nods at me from his side of the cage, and I nod back.

When the cage door is closed, the ref motions for each of us to join him in the middle of the octagon. As I do, I keep my eyes on Giles. He chews his mouthguard and slides it into place, moving his gaze from me to the ref.

"Let's have a clean fight," the ref says, looking between us. "Listen to my instructions and protect yourself at all times."

Don't have to tell me twice.

Giles and I both nod and the ref steps back.

"Touch hands if you'd like, and begin."

Giles holds out his fist, and memories of Hens clocking me on the side of the head instead of tapping my hand try to push their way in. But I keep them out as I reach out and tap his glove, then immediately find my guard. I'm fucking *ready.*

Giles wastes no time, coming in right away with a right hand. But I keep my forearm up and step to the side so it doesn't land. He watches me as I continue to side step around him… taking a page out of Luca's book to keep him turning so he's constantly readjusting his stance and balance. I remember how fucking frustrating that is.

I quickly step in and land a hard low kick to his leg, and it's immediately obvious that he feels it. And while he attempts to create some distance for a moment to recover, I step in again with a high kick aimed at his head, which he evades. And even though it didn't land, it caused him to switch his stance, giving me an opportunity to get another low kick on him.

He grunts as he tries to once again control the distance between us. We're almost a minute into our five-minute round, and so far, he's just let me kick him. I have the height advantage on him, giving me more power behind my kicks, and he's not going to be able to just absorb these the whole fight.

He seems to realize this as well, and he quickly moves forward with a body kick. But I keep my arm tight against my side to protect my ribs and

let him get my forearm.

“Come on, Ty!” I hear Rosa’s voice from the corner of the cage and the cheers from my other teammates. And I let their voices urge me on.

I manage to get another kick on him, but he quickly enters my space and lands a cross to my head. But I don’t give him any time to make his next move, as I close the distance between us and land a body shot right to his side while he tries to keep his guard high and tight to protect his head.

He grimaces and steps backwards, so I close in on him again and kick the same spot on his side. I have him close to the cage wall, and I’d like to get him all the way over there.

And even though Giles appears to be in pain, he still looks fierce and hungry for it as he moves into my space once again. He’s fucking tough, I’ll give him that.

He lands a hard straight punch to the side of my face which knocks me down to my knees. The crowd cheers, but it quickly fades away as I zero in and bring this back into *my* control.

Immediately, I’m back on my feet and rush him, ducking my head and slamming into his torso as I push him right into the side of the cage. I let my fists fly as I connect with his head and face, over and over again, and Giles is forced to duck his head and wrap his arms around my midsection to protect himself.

So I go for his body instead. And he’s losing steam, as the body shots are now also taking a toll on him. My eyes catch the clock, and there are only forty seconds left in this round. I assume he knows this as well and is trying to finish out this round with his head down while he takes my hits, so he can bring it in round two.

But we’re not going to round two.

I manage to create enough space between us so I can lower myself under his arm. He allows this to happen since it momentarily allows him access to my head, and he takes advantage of it with a few hits to the side of it.

But that doesn’t last long, as I wrap my arms around his waist, lift him up and slam him right down onto the floor with a loud *thud* and he grunts in pain.

The crowd erupts in wild cheers as I fall down on top of him, and unleash a fury of hits to his head. He lifts his arms to block me, completely on his defense and unable to counterattack.

And as we reach the final seconds of round one, I slide up into high mount over his chest. So far, this fight has been all striking. But I’m still a grappler.

His arms are already up to defend against my hits on him, so I grab his wrist, swing my leg up under his neck, and squeeze, putting him in a mounted triangle choke.

And Giles taps, with four seconds left in the first round.

As I rise to my feet and the roar of the crowd comes rushing back in, my eyes close and I take a deep breath.

Fuck, I love this.

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TWENTY-SIX

MY EYES STAY GLUED to Josh fucking Howe as he prowls the cage, watching me as I get patted down by the ref.

"Luca," Max says sternly.

I shift my gaze to him, and he shakes his head.

"Stay focused," Max says. "You know what to do. Don't give him a chance to think. Keep him moving, be quick, and always have a plan."

I nod and blow out a breath. "Easy."

"All good." The ref steps back, gesturing for me to enter the cage.

"You got this." Max nods to me, then I head up the stairs.

"Go, Luca!" Rosa yells from the side of the cage. I let my eyes slide to her, Noah and Adão for a moment as I head to my corner, giving them a nod and a small smile. They already fought and won, and I appreciate that they are cage side to lend support.

I quickly glance towards the back of the floor area towards the dressing rooms, and knowing that Ty is in there, safe and getting fixed up after his fight sends a wave of confidence through me. He fucking dominated… and I'm about to do the same.

I get to my corner and hop on my feet as I stretch my neck side to side, while I stare down the guy I'm about to fuck up.

Motherfucker is going to fucking pay for what he did to Ty.

The ref approaches the middle of the octagon and calls us both to him.

"Luca Mitchell," Howe says with a sly smirk as he stops before me.

I nod at him. "Josh Howe."

His brow furrows and his eyes flash with rage. "It's Hens."

“Huh?” I ask, but then it clicks. “Ooohh, *Hens*.” I say, giving him the finger guns with a click of my tongue. “Like a chicken. Ok yeah, got it now.”

“Fuck you, motherfucker,” Hens spits as he steps closer, but the ref quickly places a hand to his chest and pushes him back.

“Hey!” The ref stares him down as Hens continues to glare at me, and I chuckle. “Listen, Hens, I’m not putting up with any bullshit,” the ref says to him, clearly aware of his reputation. “I call the shots here.” He then slides his eyes to me and lowers his hand from Hens’ chest. “You both going to fight within the rules?”

I nod with a smile aimed at Hens. The same smile I used to save just for Ty to piss him off. “Yup.”

Hens’ jaw tics as he stares back at me, and I know he’s going to come in guns blazing.

He gives the slightest nod ever.

“Listen to me at all times.” The ref then steps back, indicating for us to step back from each other as well and into our corners to create space between us. “Touch hands if you want to, then begin.”

I take in the rage emanating from Hens and briefly consider not touching hands with him. He took advantage of Ty initiating sportsmanship with him, he’ll probably do it again. But I hold my hand out anyway.

I’m not fucking scared of him.

I keep my left arm up high and tight as I wait for him to tap my hand, and prepare to step to the left in case he does anything stupid. But he touches my hand. And even though it’s more like a swat to get it away, I’ll take it.

Hens comes right in with a kick to my thigh, then another low kick in an attempt to sweep my foot. I respond with a kick of my own, and it lands hard on his leg.

But as I go for a straight right, he comes at me, dropping low and bringing his shoulder to my midsection, pushing me back into the cage wall. He continues to hold me against the cage and gets a hit to my ribs as he just shoves his shoulder into my upper stomach so it’s hard to breathe.

Ok, so he obviously doesn’t have a plan. But I do.

I wrap my arm around his neck, holding his head tight to my side as I pull back and put him in a guillotine choke. As he drops low in an attempt to lessen the pressure on his neck, I get a leg around his waist, then lift the

other one so he has my entire weight around his neck. He's forced to drop to his knees, and I pull back hard with him still in the guillotine.

But I know it's not enough. I know he can flip backwards to land on his back and get out of it. Which he does. Then he reaches back with fucking outstretched fingers heading straight towards my face. I turn my head at the last second, so I don't get a fucking eye poke from him, which forces me to partially release him. And he takes advantage of this to escape my hold and roll over.

Hens climbs on top of me, and I'm fucking livid. An eye poke? Really? He thinks that's going to fucking work for him? It didn't with Ty, and it won't with me.

I get my knees under me and push to my feet, so he can't get onto my back for back control. He's scrambling here on the ground, but with him at my back, I'd rather have my feet under me.

Once I'm on my feet again, he gets one arm around me from behind to block my arm, and his other hand lands a punch to the side of my head.

And as he has me trapped against the side of the cage, I can't use my right arm to pull him into anything or to lay hits on him. He drives his left knee into my leg, over and over, and as he makes contact with the side of my knee, I wince. *Fuck, that hurts.*

I manage to get my left arm away from his and lift my elbow to bring it back and get him in his face, which should be hard enough to send him backwards and give me time to turn around. But the fucking asshole hooks his fingers in my glove and grips tight, keeping me from moving my arm back.

"Fuck off!" I yell as I try again, but he hangs on tight.

"Let go of the glove!" the ref yells to Hens.

He does, and the second my hand is free from his hold, I lift my elbow and make contact with his face. *Hard.*

And I'm glad the ref didn't stop the fight for the glove grab, because that felt fucking great.

Hens immediately tries to get onto my back again, but I turn and dump him. He falls to his knees, but quickly pops back up. And when he does, my glove meets his face and blood speckles the octagon floor.

Beautiful.

He once again pushes me against the cage, and I'm getting really fucking sick of this shit. He's letting the cage do his work for him as he

holds me against it and knees my ribs. He's apparently a one-trick dog, or whatever it is.

I manage a couple hits on him, and he does the same to me. I have a cut near my eye that is stinging, and blood and sweat is dripping into it. But I blink it away and stay focused.

And like the chicken he is, he once again ducks his head, avoiding my hits and moving to attack my legs. Which is a dumb move.

I get my arm around his neck again and drop down to my knees, bringing him with me. I waste no time pulling back, increasing the pressure on his neck and waiting for him to tap.

Instead, he rushes forward to get his foot under him, so he can push into standing. But that's no problem. We can do this standing as well, I'm adaptable. I don't let go, moving to my feet with him and maintaining my hold on his neck. He has to tap soon… this is a tight fucking choke.

But he brings a knee up, and it lands directly on my groin. And I *know* that was intentional.

"Hens!" the ref calls out, but we don't stop.

I have a cup on, so while it hurts, it's manageable. And even though groin strikes are not allowed, we're not stopping this. I need to keep going.

As I'm forced to release him because of the brief rush of pain through my balls and stomach, he moves back to create some distance between us for a moment.

And as he lands a low kick, I barely have it in me to return one. I'm fucking exhausted. He's doing exactly what we knew he would. He's resorting to dirty moves to get out of dead ends. And this time, he's making it all look like accidents so the fight doesn't stop and we don't have to reset. Because of that, I'm forced to work harder, and I don't know how I'm going to keep this pace up for the next minute of this round.

But I have to.

I manage a swift left hook to his head, which causes him to step back for a moment and regroup. But he comes back in with a body shot, landing on my sore, bruised ribs from all his knees earlier.

I take a deep breath as I try to muster up more energy, as an insane amount of it is being expended for this bullshit. But after a few more hits and kicks on each other, I'm over it. And I can tell he is getting tired now too.

So, enough of this.

I get low and rush his leg, wrapping my arm under his knee and pulling up hard so he falls down to the floor. The cheers erupt from the crowd, and I take that as a sign they don't like this fucker very much either.

As I fall on top of him, I immediately move my knees up into his armpits to keep his arms restricted, and my heels push into his hips to keep him from bucking or rolling out of it. He lifts his arms over his face to protect from my attack, but instead of hitting him, I hook my arm through his, pull it against my body and shift my hips so I can pull him into an armbar. There's no way he can get out of this one.

But the second I lean over him, his other hand comes out, and he strikes me in the fucking throat.

I'm stunned for a second as I momentarily loosen my grip on him, and try to catch my breath. I hear the ref yell something, but I can't hear him as I focus on gathering myself after he pulled yet another prohibited move. But I quickly shake it off, as I know the fight won't be stopped for that and we have just seconds left in this round.

I'm left scrambling to control his arm again, and he manages to get another hit to my ribs, as I get one more to his face. But it's weak, and I'm relieved when the bell sounds to signal the end of the round.

I push off him and make my way to my corner as Max enters the cage, shaking his head.

"For fuck's sake," he mutters as he stops before me, looking over my face. "He's a fucking asshole."

I wince as the cutman cleans the cut by my eye and one on my lip, but I don't answer Max as I just continue to stare down Hens and try to catch my breath.

"Deep breath in, and blow it all out," Max says.

I do as he says, my eyes still on Hens as the ref walks over to talk to him.

"Luca. Eyes here."

My eyes slide to Max, and he nods in understanding.

"Every time you had him, it was on the ground or in a hold," he says. "But you've been able to get some solid hits on him. His tactic is to wear you down and take cheap shots when he's stuck. So *you* wear *him* down, then take him down to the ground again. Because he's just going to use his energy for dirty hits and bullshit, so take it away from him."

I nod, in desperate need of some energy myself so I can do just that.

“Ok, go get him.” Max pats my shoulder as he leaves the cage, and I shake my arms out to get ready for round two.

But as Max moves out of the way, my eyes land on Ty at the side of the cage with everyone else. He has a cut under his eye, but otherwise he looks good. And suddenly, some of the energy I need starts to rise up inside me.

Ty holds my gaze as he brings his fist into the palm of his other hand.

The tiger’s punch.

I nod to him, blowing out a breath and turning to the ref as he points at me.

“You ready?”

I nod, shifting my gaze to Hens. His face is fucked, and I love that for him. Because I’m about to make it even worse.

When the ref signals for us to begin, I immediately close in on Hens. I know he’s going to start with a kick, as he always does. He may be a dirty fucker, but in some ways he’s predictable.

The second his weight shifts, and his glove drops slightly in preparation for him to rotate into his kick, I step into him. Every single muscle in my body ignites, sending power directly to my arm as I aim a left hook to the side of his face. I put everything I possibly can into it, knowing this needs to end right here, right now. And as my fist connects with his head, with a force I didn’t know I had in me, my entire body lights the fuck up.

The sound of him hitting the floor is almost drowned out by the cheers from the crowd. I fucking got him. I jump on him, landing another hit before the ref pushes me back, and stops the fight.

Josh Hens is knocked the fuck out.

The loud roar of the crowd completely takes over the space, and I bring my hands to my face as I take a deep breath in. When I drop them, my eyes find Ty. He’s standing and smiling widely as he claps along with the rest of our teammates as they cheer and yell. But my eyes stay on him, as I put my hand over my heart and point to the sky.

Before I join Max and the cutman in my corner, I bring my attention back to Hens. He’s come to, and his coach has pulled him onto a stool.

I walk over to him, looking down at his dazed expression.

It suits him.

I lean down and bring my mouth to his ear.

“That was for my boyfriend, Ty Roscoe.” Then I look into his eyes and smile. “Fuck you.”

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TWENTY-SEVEN

"TO THE BEST damn fight team in Missouri!"

"Fuck yeah!" I raise my beer, clinking it to everyone else's drinks as we cheers to the epic fucking wins our entire team had tonight.

"So far this team is undefeated," Noah says after he takes a drink.

I smile at him, taking in his fresh face, looking like he wasn't even in a fight tonight. Demon Mouse came out hard and ended his fight twenty-three seconds into the first round with an epic takedown and an armbar. His opponent didn't even get a hit on him. Poor guy must be pretty disappointed he didn't get to show Noah his hammer.

Adão groans, leaning back in his chair. "You don't even know how fucking pissed I would be if I ended up losing that fight. All three rounds, at an intense fucking pace." He sighs and closes his eyes. "I need to sleep for two weeks."

Rosa chuckles and pats him on the back. "Same. Byers went so hard on my legs I think I'll need a cane or something to get around for a bit."

"And Luca," Elijah smiles at me, "you get the prize for most busted-up face."

I smile, painfully, as the cut on my lip pulls tight. "Two black eyes are better than one." Everyone laughs, and I take a drink of my beer, trying not to laugh as well because my ribs are fucking *sore.*

Our waitress approaches our table cautiously, glancing around at us with our cuts, bruises and swelling faces as we laugh and joke around. "Another round?"

"Yes," Max says with a nod. "On my tab."

“Got it,” she says, and quickly turns to scurry away. Poor girl. I bet we look absolutely psychotic.

Seb shakes his head as he leans forward to rest his elbows on the table. “Fucking Hens. I can’t believe that bastard was even here.”

Max huffs out a breath. “I think with his reputation, he can’t get many fights unless he gets on the list as a last-minute replacement.”

“What are the fucking odds that he was a replacement for *this* fight and ended up with Luca.” Elijah looks at me with a serious nod. “Fucking asshole deserved that KO.”

I smile as everyone agrees, and we clink our glasses again to the downfall of Josh fucking Hens.

Ty is quiet beside me as he shifts his weight in his seat and takes a drink of his beer. As happy as he is that I beat Hens, I know it also carries other emotions for him. That asshole fucked him up, and to see him again right after he was finally able to move on from the fear that had a hold of him was tough. But to then watch him fight me, I know he is downplaying just how difficult that was.

But I took care of it.

For him.

“And Ty,” Max says, gently bringing the attention to him. “What a fucking comeback.”

Ty nods, smirking shyly as he looks down at his beer while everyone whoops for him.

“Ah yes,” I say, nudging my elbow into his. “A *comeback*. Ty is good at those.”

He rolls his eyes at me, but I see the small smile tugging at his lips.

And I take a moment to just watch him.

I fucking hated him in the years I’ve known him. And when we came to Fairburn MMA, I thought my hate for him was only going to grow. But as we were forced to work together, I ended up learning so much from him. Both in grappling, and in love. And I have to chuckle to myself as I think of the past two fights. We each fought with what we learned from each other, and I think it’s some of the best fighting we’ve ever done. And there’s something kind of poetic about the fact that in this fight, our newfound strength in each other’s fighting styles ultimately set us up to take the win with our original strength. A submission for Ty, and a strike for me.

We needed each other to get here.

“Well,” Max says, looking around at all of us. “LFA officials were impressed. I suspect you’ll all be receiving acceptances this week. And it’s only five weeks away. So, take this week to heal and rest, with *light* training only. Then we’re getting back into it.” He smiles around at us as we murmur our excitement. Then he turns serious again. “But *if* you don’t get accepted, it’s ok. We’ll get the next one.”

A slight rush of dread rolls through me at that thought, but I quickly push it away. I’m not going to worry about that right now. I took out an asshole chicken tonight, and the adrenaline from that victory is still pumping through my veins. So right now, that’s all that matters.

As everyone falls into conversation about LFA, I feel Ty’s hand slide onto my thigh under the table. I turn my head to him, and he leans in closer to me, his hand sliding dangerously close to my cock.

“This still work after that groin strike?” he asks in a low voice.

My heart jumps as I stare back and nod a bit too eagerly. “Fuck yeah it does.”

His hand cups my dick over my jeans and I have to bite back a groan.

“Good.” His lips tilt up in a soft lopsided smile. “Because I think I want to try out this whole celebration thing you keep nagging me about.”

I smile, ignoring the pain as I let anticipation take over. “I think you should.”

My lips are on Ty’s before our hotel room door is even closed. It hurts like hell, but I don’t fucking care. And as I feel Ty wincing against my lips, I know he feels the same way.

We’re frantic and desperate as hands slide under shirts and into pants, clothes quickly falling to the floor as adrenaline fuels us. The high from winning a fight is always an amazing feeling, but this is making me soar even higher.

Ty’s hand slides into my boxers and grasps my cock. He strokes me as he continues to slide his tongue along mine with a desperate need, and I’m right there with him.

I lift one hand to the side of his face, and he grunts in pain as I grip him a bit too tightly. But I just smile against his lips, because he doesn't stop as he wraps an arm around my back and pulls me closer to him.

And now I'm wincing in pain because my fucking ribs are on fire.

Ty loosens his grip on me, stepping back just enough so he can drop his eyes to my ribs. Specifically the moon and stars tattoo, which now has a massive bruise blooming over it. He pulls his hand out of my boxers, and gently runs his fingers over the tattoo. And I stay silent as I watch him, while he softly traces the moon and each of the stars, seeming to get lost in his head for a moment. Then his eyes slide up to meet mine, and they burn bright with need and desire.

I smile at him. "Let's fuck, Tiger."

His lips are on mine again in an instant, and this time, the pain doesn't even register. All I know is that I fucking need him, and I'm taking everything he can give me.

He drops to his knees before me, pulling my boxers down and taking me into his mouth in one swift motion. And *fuck*, he feels so fucking good.

Ty sucks me with the same intensity as our kiss, and my entire body is tingling with each lick, suck and stroke on my cock. The feeling of pain mixing with pleasure is igniting every single one of my senses and it feels like every nerve in my body is firing. My fingers slide into his hair and my eyes close as I let this intense pleasure completely take over.

I groan as his hand slides up my leg and he takes me deep into his hot mouth. "Fuck yeah, baby, that feels so fucking good."

And suddenly we both still, frozen in space as those words… *that* word… lingers in the air around us.

He releases me from his mouth, and as I open my eyes to look down at him, he lifts his dark eyes to meet mine. And I see the same horror on his face that I feel in me.

I shake my head, not even sure what to say. "That… was fucked."

Ty nods slowly. "Yeah. It was."

"I… I have no idea what came over me."

He pushes to his feet, grabs my arm and turns me around to push me onto the bed.

And I don't even try to fight it. I definitely have a punishment coming for that, and I know I deserve it. I let the adrenaline get the best of me, and I will now willingly pay the price.

Ty leans over me on the bed, bringing his lips close to my ear. “Ass up… *baby*.”

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TWENTY-EIGHT

THAT CAN'T EVER HAPPEN AGAIN.

And I know Luca feels the same way as he leans over the bed, willingly accepting his fate. Watching him submit like this, even though necessary, is doing something to me. Because while I wanted to get him back here to celebrate our wins and show my appreciation for him destroying that fucking asshole… I can't help but feel the rush from dominating him like this.

Old habits die hard.

I leave him on the bed and head over to his bag to retrieve the lube. And when I turn around, I'm pleased to see he hasn't moved.

He watches me over his shoulder as I return to the bed, and run a hand over his ass. Then I sink my fingers into his flesh, squeezing hard.

"Good boy."

He groans as he buries his face in the bed, and I chuckle as I pop open the lube. Anticipation rises within me as I pour it over my fingers, and I feel desperate to take as much as I can from him.

But he has the same idea, as the second my finger is on his hole, Luca pushes up onto his hands and presses his ass back against my finger.

Greedy motherfucker.

I push my finger in him anyway, and his body immediately reacts. His head drops between his shoulders as he groans, and the muscles in his back flex as he grinds his ass against my hand. And I feel a surge of energy in me too. It's a somewhat familiar feeling, as I always feel like I'm on high alert after a fight while the adrenaline remains. But this, here with Luca, is

different. I'm feeling everything at max power, while every sense is heightened, my heart races and my muscles tingle. We're riding an intense high… and it's the best one I've ever had.

As I move my finger in and out of his ass, my eyes roam over the cuts and bruises on his body, blending in and almost hidden among the colorful tattoos covering his torso. And when my eyes land on the unicorn tattoo, I can't help but huff out a breath of amusement and push another finger into him.

Luca grunts and fists the bedsheets, rolling his hips in an attempt to ask for more. So I bring my head down, running my tongue over the flesh of his ass and reach between his legs to stroke his cock.

"Fuck, Ty," Luca groans into the bed. "I feel like I could come right now."

"Don't," I say, not letting up.

He lets out a pained grunt, almost like a whimper, as I push a third finger into his ass.

"Jesus Christ," he breathes out as he reaches down to bat my hand away from his cock. "I'm fucking serious."

"I am too," I say, continuing to relentlessly finger his ass. "Don't come."

"Argh," he moans, dropping his head to the bed again. "Fuck you."

I smirk as I curl and move my fingers inside him, pulling whimpers and moans from him as he tries desperately to hold it together. But I want to push this further.

"You're the one who went soft on me," I say. "You've gotta pay for that."

Luca turns his head to glare at me, but before he can respond, I manage to push a fourth finger inside of him.

"Holy *fuck*." He pushes back up onto his hands and as he writhes and moans, it looks like he's about to lose control.

"Fuck," I mutter as I watch my fingers in his ass, pushing them in deeper. He groans loudly, and now the need to dominate him is quickly morphing into a desire to provide him with as much pleasure as possible.

I grip his hip tight with my other hand and push my fingers deep into him again. "You look so fucking good like this, with my fingers deep in your perfect fucking ass. You're doing such a good job, getting ready for my cock."

Luca’s body shudders, and he groans so loudly I almost think I should put my hand over his mouth to quiet him. But fuck that.

We’re *celebrating.*

I pump my fingers in his ass a few more times before I pull them out and push him onto his back. His cock is weeping, and I lean down to lick the rope of precum leaking from his tip. “Fuck, you taste good.”

His hands land on my shoulders and he pushes me back as he sits up, breathing heavily with a shake of his head. “I can’t tell if you’re trying to please or torture me.”

I shrug one shoulder. “Both.”

He blows out a breath. “Asshole.”

I place a hand on his chest to push him back again, but he doesn’t move, grabbing my wrist instead as he stares into my eyes.

“And who says you get to call all the shots here?” he asks, tightening his grip on my wrist.

My eyes move between his, taking in the bruising around each one and the cut and swelling on the side of his face. After what he went through tonight, I guess I can let him have some control here.

“What is it you want to do to me, Mitchell?” I ask, keeping my eyes on his.

The corner of his lips tilt up in a lopsided smile. “I don’t think your comeback is over quite yet.” He then smiles wider. “And I’m still hungry for your ass.”

I huff as my eyes drop to his busted lip. “You think you can do that?”

He leans back, pulling my wrist so I fall forward with him. But then he pushes me so I’m on my back, and he’s on top of me.

“Fine.” He nudges my knee aside with his, then tilts his head towards the lube on the bed. “Lube,” he says in a simple, demanding tone.

My eyes narrow, the urge rising to push him off me and go back to teaching him a fucking lesson.

But I don’t, and I reach for the lube and pass it to him.

My heart thumps as he pours some on his fingers, then lowers himself between my legs. His tongue runs up the length of my cock, as he pushes a lubed finger to my hole.

“Fuck,” I breathe out, letting my eyes close for a moment as the mix of warm and cold sensations send a rush of pleasure through me. I get lost to the feeling as he continues to rub his fingers over my hole, my body

lighting up and a warmth spreading through me. And when he pushes his finger inside of me, that warmth turns almost hot.

Luca licks and sucks my cock as best as he can with his cut lip while he thrusts his finger in and out of my ass, and I moan at the overwhelming feeling. My fingers slide into his hair as I let him work me, my focus now only on this feeling and how fucking good it is. And once he's fucking my ass with two fingers with his wet mouth on my cock, I know what he meant by torture or pleasure. I can barely fucking take it.

"Ok," I pant, pushing him back. "Fuck."

He chuckles as he sits up, then swings a leg over my hips to straddle me. I start to sit up as well, ready to lay him on his back, but he forcefully pushes me back down with a hand to my chest.

A small smirk finds its way onto his lips as he looks down at me. "Easy there, Tiger."

He grasps my cock with one hand as he lowers himself on top of me, and Jesus fucking Christ, he feels so fucking good that I can't even be mad about him taking over. My head tips back as my hands land on his thighs, and we're both groaning and moaning as he rocks his hips. Immediately, we're fucking fast and frantic, letting the energy in us take over completely.

This time when I sit up, he lets me. I wrap my arm around his back as I pull him closer against me, and he grinds down hard on my cock. And the guttural groan he releases as I bring his nipple into my mouth has me close to coming.

But I notice how he's wincing, trying to shift his weight off his bruised knee and holding his torso tight to protect his sore ribs.

With my arm behind his back, I roll us over so I'm on top of him and can take over. I fuck him even harder, ignoring my own pain in my body as an intense need drives me to continue and bring us both pleasure.

But the second his hand lands on his cock and he gives himself a few strokes, I stop. I'm not going to last much longer.

And we're not done.

Luca meets my eyes with a smirk. "Ass up… *baby*."

I pull him up so we're nose to nose and glare at him. "You haven't learned your lesson yet?"

He chuckles. "I could use a reminder. But first," he reaches for the lube and holds it up, "your ass needs a good fuck."

My eyes slide to the lube in his hand and my heart picks up its pace, the anticipation rising once again.

“That’s what I thought,” Luca says, pushing me so I move onto all fours and he settles behind me.

And as he pushes his cock into me, my head drops to the bed with a groan. The intense pressure as he fills me sends a strong tingle up my spine, and I almost feel lightheaded at how fucking good he feels. The adrenaline that has been surging through me all night is now getting dangerously close to exploding, and I’m having a hard time keeping it together as Luca thrusts his cock into me and increases his pace.

“Fuck, this ass,” Luca groans as his hands run over my back and ass. “So fucking tight.”

My hand drops to my cock as I moan into the bed, the pressure rapidly building within me.

“Luca,” I pant, pushing onto my hands and grinding my ass back into him. “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

“Don’t.”

My head whips around, and my eyes meet his as he thrusts into me hard and holds me against him so I can’t move, and he smirks playfully.

I guess there’s still some fight left in us after all.

His grip is tight on my hips, and he pulls me against him even harder as I try to move away. The energy between us crackles as our eyes stay locked, the battle to dominate coming to a head.

And it’s not going to end with his dick in my ass.

I quickly push up onto my knees, hook his arm over my shoulder and flip him onto his back on the bed. He grunts and winces as he lands, and I almost feel bad about it. But he’ll be fine. He had that coming.

And before he can protest or make a move, I grab his knee and slam into him.

And like the good fucking boy he is, he fucking takes it.

“Fuck,” he grunts, letting his head fall back on the bed. “Yeah, fuck me.”

Yeah. That’s better.

I fuck him with everything I have, and the tingles in my body are now a roaring fire. And this feels so fucking good, I can’t hold off any longer.

I let it all go, as everything inside me that has been building under pressure is released. The anticipation leading up to tonight, the fight, and

now Luca beneath me… it all explodes with an intense euphoria flowing through me, and I groan as I come in his ass.

Luca’s hand falls to his cock and he pumps himself as he watches me. “Fuck yeah, I’m going to come.”

So I pull out of his ass, and immediately bring my mouth to his hole.

“Oh my god,” Luca grunts as I lick and suck him, tasting my cum in his ass as his cock erupts.

I watch as he comes all over his dick and abs, and I drag my tongue from his hole, up his balls, and over his cock. My cum in my mouth mixes with his, and he watches me with heavy breaths as I lick it all up.

As I move back up his body, I grasp his chin and open his mouth, letting our cum drip from my tongue onto his.

His eyes stay locked on mine as he swallows, then he smiles.

“The ultimate comeback.”

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TWENTY-NINE

"WHAT'S THIS?"

"A ratchet."

"Nice. What's this?"

"An impact driver."

"Oh cool. And what's this?"

"For fuck's sake, Mitchell, will you just put the fucking tools down?"

I chuckle as I set Ty's precious tool that looks like a screwdriver with a huge flat head back down on his workbench. But he glares at me until I put it back *exactly* where I found it. Even at work in a garage he's a control freak.

I take a moment to appreciate his ass as he bends over to retrieve a bucket looking thing. I guess this isn't so bad. When he told me to stop in after work so he could change my oil, I thought it would be boring. But so far, it's a blast.

He places the bucket thing on some kind of table thing under my Jeep and pulls a plug of some kind from the engine. And a stream of dark, thick liquid drips into the bucket.

"Ew," I say as I scrunch up my face, watching the oil drip out of my Jeep.

"Yeah," he says, looking at me. "*Ew.* This should have been done months ago."

I shrug, not sure what he wants me to do about that. "You're the mechanic."

“You know, customers aren’t actually allowed back here,” he says, his eyes dropping to the tools on the bench beside me, which I definitely have been playing with.

“Yeah, I can see why,” I say, looking around the garage. “It seems pretty dangerous back here.”

Suddenly, a huge realization hits me. I bring my eyes back to Ty and gasp loudly.

He looks up at me. “What?”

“Oh my god.”

“What?” he asks again.

“You’re a mechanic.”

He just stares back at me. “Yes…”

“And you’re giving me a *lube job*.”

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, turning away from me to remove the now gross, filled bucket.

“I can’t believe I’ve never thought to make this joke before. Oh my god.” I run my fingers through my hair and blow out a breath. “I’m so disappointed in myself.”

Tim laughs from his bay. “Luca, you need to come visit more often.”

“No,” Ty says, shaking his head at Tim. “He doesn’t.”

“Hm.” I nod. “Yes. Yes, I think I will.”

Jake chuckles as he wipes his hands and leans against the wall. “So, back in the gym yet?”

“Today,” I say with a nod. “I would have preferred to take more than three days off after almost breaking my face, but as I’m sure you know, Ty is a bit uptight.”

Ty shoots me a look and I just smile back at him. He doesn’t know this yet, but Rosa wants to do yoga with us today. And I agreed. For both of us.

“Hope you’re not planning on taking any more hits to that face any time soon,” Tim says as he looks over at me. “Ty said you took some nasty hits, but damn… that looks like it fucking hurts.”

“It looks worse than it is,” I say, picking up one of Ty’s screwdrivers and twirling it in my hand. His eyes land on it, and I chuckle as he tries to pretend like it’s not eating away at him that I’m touching his shit.

“And how does that go, working with kids? Does your work have an issue with…” Jake waves a hand in the air, gesturing to the entirety of my face, “this?”

I laugh and try not to wince against the pain from the cut in my lip. “My previous school in Warsaw hated it, but this one is actually really good about it.” I watch as Ty pulls something out of my Jeep that looks like a cylinder with folded up cloth in it. The fuck is that? But I shrug it off and continue. “The kids are interested in hearing about it, and they know it’s a sport that they will not be doing.” I chuckle. “I’m sure some parents may have an issue with it but… kids don’t judge, and that’s pretty fucking cool.”

Jake smiles with a nod. “That’s awesome.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I sigh, pulling it out as Jake and Tim get back to work. It’s probably my parents sending a text, since they’re going to be here in a few days and we still haven’t spoken. The last I heard from them was my dad’s text that fueled my rage outburst on Ty. Which actually cured him so… in a way that text was helpful? That’s a confusing feeling…

I unlock my screen, expecting a scolding text since I didn’t tell them about the fight and I think one of my sisters may have mentioned it to them. But I don’t have a text, it’s an email.

From Legacy Fighting Alliance.

“Holy shit.” I hop off the workbench, sending tools flying to the ground.

Ty whips around. “What the fuck–”

“Shhh.” I hold my hand up to quiet him as I keep looking down at my phone, scanning the email. Then I look up at him, eyes wide.

“What?” he asks, stepping closer.

“Check your email.”

“Why?” he asks, taking a rag off the bench to wipe his hands.

“Just fucking do it.”

Ty pulls his phone out of his pocket with a sigh and taps at it. I watch him, my heart racing as his eyes move over the screen. Then he looks up at me, with a shocked and hopeful expression.

“Are you in?”

I nod. “Yeah. Are you?”

“Yeah.” He nods as well.

“Oh my god.”

Ty’s face breaks out in a huge smile as he steps forward, wrapping his arms around me as I jump on him with a whoop of excitement.

“LFA?” Tim asks excitedly as he and Jake set their tools down and come over to join us.

“Yeah,” Ty says with a grin as he turns to face them, his arm still around me. “We’re in.”

“And big breath in…”

I breathe in through my nose as I lift my arms over my head, appreciating the gentle stretch for my sore ribs.

“And breathe out while bringing your fingers down to your toes…”

“Uh, yeah, sorry babe. That ain’t happening.”

I look over at Seb as he reaches down for his toes, not even coming close. And I chuckle, as I look down at my own toes which seem so far away…

Rosa looks behind her, her gaze scanning the row of six men on yoga mats, who are definitely not able to touch their toes and probably never will.

“Ok,” she says with a chuckle, “just… as far as you can.” She turns around placing her hands on the mat and steps forward with one foot, in one swift, graceful move like a fucking ninja. “Now bring your right foot forward between your hands on the mat.”

“Oh yeah, that’s easier,” Elijah mutters, then grunts as he swings his leg forward and doesn’t even make it halfway to his hands.

“Then lower your hips to the mat,” Rosa says, either oblivious or choosing to ignore the clusterfuck going on behind her.

I look over at Ty as he wiggles his foot forward on the mat with a grimace, and tries to bring his hips low.

“Yeah…” I say as I watch him. “Just like that…”

“Fuck off,” he grunts as he keeps his eyes on Rosa and tries to recreate this fucking impossible move.

And at this point, I’ve given up. I lay down on my stomach and prop my chin up in my hands while I watch the show. If I was to continue that contortionist shit, I’d probably pop a hip out.

“Am I supposed to feel a burning in the back of my leg?” Adão asks as he looks around at us all with panic in his eyes.

“Breathe into it,” Rosa says as she lifts her arms in the air and takes a deep breath.

Adão rolls his eyes, dramatically mouthing, “*Oh, ok,*” as he attempts to adjust himself and almost falls over.

Noah winces as he holds his pose, pretty damn close to getting it. “And how long do we hold this for?”

A laugh sounds behind us, and we all look over our shoulder to see Max standing with his arms crossed, watching us.

“I might have to put this into weekly training plans moving forward,” he says.

Rosa stands and turns around to face us all. “Yeah, you should.” She gestures to us all in a row before her, trying to get out of her weird pretzel move. “This is fucking sad.”

Max laughs again, watching as Elijah stands up and groans, rubbing his hips as he shakes a leg out. “Well, I was going to say I’m happy to see you’re not all pushing yourselves too far too soon, but…”

“Look,” Seb shakes his head and points to the mat, “there’s flexibility, and then there’s *that.* That won’t be happening again.”

Rosa rolls her eyes and crosses her arms. “Don’t be a baby about it.”

Max holds up a hand with a smile. “Ok, yoga and flexibility aside… how are we all feeling about your LFA acceptances?”

We all erupt in cheers and whoops of excitement, and I smile around at everyone. Every single one of us is accepted to fight in LFA in Vegas. It’s unusual to have so many fighters in one event from one team, but… we’re the fucking best.

“I figured,” Max laughs. “You all deserve it.” He looks around at all of us with a proud look on his face. “Take the next couple days to finish healing, and train light in cardio… or yoga.” A few groans sound from around the room, and he just chuckles. “But most of all take some time to have some fun and relax this week. You’re already in peak condition from Dallas, so we’ll be maintaining that over the next four weeks.” He pauses for a moment, looking down at the yoga mats. “And don’t pull any muscles.”

I laugh and turn to face Ty as Seb and Rosa fall into an argument about yoga, each of them pulling at a mat while Seb tries to put it away and Rosa tells him he needs to breathe more.

“What do you think, Tiger?” I ask, taking in the sparkle in his eye and the slight smile on his lips. “We going to have some fun?”

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THIRTY

AS I UNLOCK Luca's apartment and push the door open, I'm met with the smell of cookies. And as my eyes roam over the messy kitchen counters filled with baking ingredients, I sigh.

Here we fucking go again.

I close the door behind me, and Luca turns around in surprise. He wasn't expecting me until later since I was going to go to my place first and grab more clothes. But I decided not to bother, since pretty much everything I wear regularly is already here.

His eyes dart from me to the mixing bowl before him, then back to me. "I can explain."

"Wasn't it just yesterday you were asking me if I was ready to have fun?" I toss my keys on the table and take in the pile of baked goods on the counter. He clearly started the second he got home from work.

Luca nods, turning back to mixing whatever he has in the bowl before him. "Yeah, and we will. I just need to get this out first."

"I take it you finally heard from your parents?" I ask, crossing my arms and leaning against the counter beside him.

He measures salt into a spoon and pours it into the bowl. "Yup." He then sighs and forcefully slams the salt on the counter, then reaches for a cookie and shoves it in his mouth. "My mom called," he says with his mouth full. "And I was forced to answer because I have to," he holds his fingers up in air quotes, "*deal with it*."

I nod. "Yeah. You do."

"Ugh." He grabs another cookie and eats that too.

I stay quiet, waiting for him to get to the fucking point.

He grabs a spoon and starts stirring something in another bowl. “They’re going to be here this weekend for their conference. As in *tomorrow*. And I have to go to dinner with them so we can *talk*.” He scoffs. “At least it’s in a public place so things can’t get too nasty. But both of my sisters are coming, so that will help. And I’m excited to see them. But fuck, I don’t want to have to once again defend my choices and try *so* fucking hard to make them see that I am happy with what I have, and I don’t need anything more, or anything different.”

“Ok,” I say as he nudges me aside so he can get something from the cupboard I’m leaning against. “So, what’s your plan?”

He pulls a muffin tray from the cupboard and sets it on the counter, then looks at me with a small shrug. “I don’t know. What’s my plan?”

“I don’t fucking know,” I say, unsure why he thinks *I* would have any idea how to approach a difficult conversation with family.

“Well, I don’t fucking know either! You’re always the one with the plan!” He throws his hands up in the air, and frantically starts grabbing ingredients.

I watch him for a moment, taking in just how stressed he is over this. And the fact that he’s actually showing and vocalizing this stress, and not just trying to hide it or shrug it off is a win.

When we first came to St. Louis, his ability to do whatever he wants, have fun, and never take anything seriously pissed me off more than anything. I thought everything came easy for him. But now I see just how fucking hard he works, fighting a force every step of the way to stand up for himself and his right to be happy. While I don’t understand what it’s like to have a family and be loved by them, I can appreciate that he doesn’t want to lose what he has. He deserves both love and happiness.

And the fear of losing something you love is a feeling I know well.

“Just… chill the fuck out,” I say as I catch a measuring cup that gets bumped off the counter. “You’re going to tell them you accepted a job you love, and that you’ve been accepted into an elite MMA event. And that you’re going.”

Luca blows out a breath. “They’ll find a way to still push the private school on me. It won’t be enough to stop them. I wouldn’t be surprised if they put my fucking application in *for* me.”

I bite my lip in thought as I watch him drop dough into small balls on a cookie sheet. “It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward, right?”

He cocks an eyebrow at me. “You want my parents to punch me in the face?”

“No,” I sigh. “But you need to escape this hold they have on you. And you’re always going to open yourself up to a potential hit when you change the fight. Except once you sweep, you’re now on top. And then *you* control the fight.”

Luca’s eyes drop to the cut and bruise under my eye and nods. “I also need to find a release…”

I nod. “You want them to change their perspectives on your choices, so change it for them. Right now, their only perspective is the back of your fucking head as they keep you in a tight rear naked choke and ignore everything you have to say. So, get out of it and face them. Show them how this fight is going to go.”

Luca is quiet for a moment as he just stares back at me, his eyes softening slightly.

“Are they really going to stop loving you for going after your dreams?”

He blows out a breath and nods. “Yeah… ok. I can do this.” He reaches for a bag of chocolate chips and rips it open. “I accepted a job I love, and I’m happy with it,” he mutters to himself as he dumps the chocolate chips into a bowl. “And MMA is not a hobby, I am pursuing a professional career in it, and I am good at it.”

I watch him as he continues to mumble to himself, like he’s practicing what to say to his parents, and getting lost to his head.

I dip my hand into the bowl full of flour mixture next to me, pinch some between my fingers, and flick it at him.

He blinks and sputters as it hits his face, turning to me with wide eyes. His gaze falls to the bowl I took the flour from, then back up to me. “I’m going to have to remeasure that.”

“You need to fucking relax,” I say.

His eyes somehow get wider. “*I* need to relax? Ty fucking Roscoe, telling *me* to relax?”

I shrug. “Yeah.”

“Oh, fuck you.” He rolls his eyes and lifts a hand to wipe the flour from his face. So I take this opportunity to dip my fingers in another bowl and

flick a gooey batter at him when he’s not looking. It splatters all over his chest, and he freezes as he stares down at the mess on him.

“That was the perfect fucking amount for exactly twelve blueberry muffins.”

“Eleven and half now, I guess,” I say as I wipe my hands on a towel.

His eyes lift, and as they meet mine they flicker with anger.

Good. Fucker needs to get angry and get out of his head.

Except he reaches out and grabs the bowl I just took the batter from, and narrows his eyes at me.

I push off the counter as I eye the bowl in his hand. “Thought you needed that for muffins?”

“You started this,” he says darkly as he scoops out a large handful of batter. “What the fuck am I going to do with half a muffin, Ty?”

I step back, putting distance between us so he can’t smear it all over me. “Put it the fuck down, Mitchell.”

He shakes his head, stepping closer to me as an evil smirk spreads across his lips. “Not a fucking chance.”

Just as I turn to duck around the corner and escape the kitchen, he throws the batter and it lands right in the middle of my back.

I pause, closing my eyes to gather myself before I slowly turn to face him. He’s standing in the middle of the kitchen with his batter-covered hand, looking far too fucking proud of himself.

He watches me, his smile falling as I slowly approach him and reach for the bowl of flour. I grab a fistful, hold it up before him, and blow it all in his face.

We stand silently for a moment, glaring at each other until he suddenly drops the bowl of batter and tackles me to the ground. We hit the floor with a thump and he climbs on top of me as he tries to grab my wrist. I pull it away from him, but my elbow lands in the batter on the floor and slips as I try to roll us over. He takes this opportunity to swing his leg over that arm, moving to sit over my chest in a fucking high mount position. I only have one arm free, and I can’t move him at all with my hips.

I bring my free hand up to attempt a sweep, but he quickly grabs my wrist and pins it over my head.

And with a dangerous smile, he drags his other hand through the batter all over the floor.

“Fuck off, Mitchell,” I say as I try to pull my wrist from his grip, but he just holds me tighter.

“Hm,” he hums with a tilt of his head. “No.”

He slaps his batter-covered hand to the side of my face, slowly dragging it down my cheek.

I put everything I have into rolling my body so I can create space between his leg and my trapped arm. Once I do, I pull it out and grab his arm and roll him, so he is now lying in the batter smeared all over the floor. I quickly grab the bowl of flour and throw it on him, then stand up as he’s forced to raise his arms to block it from getting all over his face.

He pushes to his feet as well, as he wipes his face and glares at me. And he has me fucking cornered, because he’s blocking the exit.

He smirks, realizing this as well. “Come and get it, Tiger.”

I stare at him for a moment longer and decide to just go for it, right where it hurts.

I grab a cinnamon roll from the counter and throw it at him.

“No!” he yells, ducking to avoid getting hit. “Not the cinnamon roll! You treat that with fucking respect!”

I look at the cinnamon roll now in pieces on the floor. “What the fuck is up with you and cinn–”

The oven timer goes off, and we both still as we’re brought back to reality.

Luca holds a hand up. “Truce. I need to get that.”

I roll my eyes and step aside, gesturing for him to do what he needs to do.

He eyes me as he walks to the oven, then takes a tray of muffins out.

“You already had fucking muffins in there,” I say, pissed off now that he was so upset about missing batter for half a fucking muffin.

“These are oatmeal, asshole. Not blueberry.” He shoots me a look over his shoulder and I try real fucking hard not to roll my eyes again.

I wipe the batter from the side of my face as Luca sets his muffins down and turns to face me. His eyes travel over my face and down my body, which is covered in batter and flour. It’s all over his clothes as well, and his hair is almost white from the amount of flour in it.

A smile tugs at my lips as I take in the mess of us and the kitchen, and Luca chuckles. The second I bring my eyes back to his, he steps forward and slams his lips into mine.

I grab his waist and pull him close as he pushes me up against the fridge and I taste the muffin batter on his lips. He pushes his hips into mine, and I can already feel him straining against his pants.

Our kiss is heated and desperate as his hand drops to undo my belt buckle, and he immediately reaches into my jeans to stroke my now hard cock. I feel him grimace a bit from the pain of my mouth against his cut lip, but he doesn't stop.

And what's really fucking weird is that the batter on his hand actually feels good on my cock.

I shove my hand into his sweatpants as well, and he groans into my mouth as I wrap my hand around his dick and pump him with the same intensity he's working me.

"Fuck, Ty," he grunts, his other hand gripping the back of my neck tight as he drops his forehead to my shoulder.

I pant heavily against him as we jerk each other, frantic and needy and a complete reflection of the messy space around us.

"Oh my god," I groan as tingles start to rise up my legs and I feel my release rushing to the surface. "Fuck, I'm going to come."

Luca nods against my shoulder, then lifts his head to slam his lips to mine again. I swallow down his moans as I feel him tense, and I fall over the edge with him.

Then he steps back and falls to his knees, keeping his eyes on me as he slowly and deliberately licks the cum and batter from my cock.

Then he licks his lips with a smile and a chuckle. "I guess that was fun."

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THIRTY-ONE

"I CAN DO THIS. Sweep, and change the fight. Sweep, then I'm in control."

I watch Luca mumble to himself as he buttons his shirt, then he repeats the same phrase while pointing at himself in the bathroom mirror.

"You'll be fine," I say to him as I shove my fight shorts in my gym bag and zip it closed.

He turns around, peering out of the bathroom at me like he just remembered I was here. "Maybe I should bring you after all."

I shake my head as panic at that thought sets in. "We both know that's not a good idea."

"Yeah," he agrees. "Bringing my ex-rival, who I'm now in love with, to dinner with my family would only prolong the conversation. And no one wants that." He exits the bathroom and nods thoughtfully to himself. "If this goes well, we can do the whole meet the parents thing next time. For now, I need to be in and out as fast as possible. Slap the bandaid on, you know?" He nods again, placing his hands on his hips as he blows out a breath.

"Rip the bandaid off," I correct him.

He furrows his brow at me. "Ew, why? That just opens wounds, doesn't it? Isn't the point to make it better, so you put the bandaid *on*?" He tilts his head and gives me a look that says I should know better. "Come on, Ty."

I sigh, choosing to ignore that, and sling my bag over my shoulder. "Come meet me at the gym after. We'll do a bag workout so you can get your frustration out."

His eyes travel down my body, stopping at my dick as the corner of his lips tilt up. He steps forward, cupping his hand over my cock in my sweatpants and leans in to brush his lips over mine. “I can think of another way I could get my frustration out.”

“I wouldn’t say no to that,” I murmur against his lips, then pull him closer to kiss him. And with his hand still on my dick, I’m not sure I can wait until later. “What time do you need to be at the restaurant?”

“I’m meeting them there in,” he lifts his wrist to check his watch, then smiles, “thirty minutes. Plenty of time.”

But just as his fingers slip into the waistband of my sweatpants, his phone buzzes.

He groans and pulls it from his pocket, then freezes.

“What?” I ask. “Is it them?”

He looks up at me with a sigh. “Yeah, it’s them. Buzzing in at the front door.”

Panic shoots through me as I look down at his phone and he buzzes them in.

“The fuck? Why are they here?” I ask.

Luca runs his fingers through his hair and frantically looks around his apartment. “It’s a motherfucking ambush.”

“Why are they here?” I ask again, since I have no idea what else to do.

Luca shakes his head, looking annoyed at the whole situation and not nearly as panicked as I feel. “Because I suggested I meet them at the restaurant, so naturally they come here.”

There’s a knock at the door, and I’m both frozen to the spot and ready to jump out the fucking window. I’m not *at all* ready for this.

Luca blows out a breath, then turns to pull the door open.

“Hi, honey!” Luca’s mom smiles at him and enters the apartment, pulling him into a hug. His dad and sisters file into the apartment behind her, and I wish the floor would swallow me whole.

“Hi, Mom…” Luca says slowly, eyeing her as she releases him from her hug. “What are you guys doing here? I thought we were meeting at the restaurant?”

“Oh please,” she waves a hand in the air and smiles as she watches Luca hug his sisters. “And not see where our son lives? We had to pass right by here to get to the restaurant from our hotel anyway, so we may as well just go together, right?”

But she doesn’t even give Luca time to answer as she turns to face me. “You must be Tyler. I’m Clara, Luca’s mother.”

I nod stiffly, stepping forward as I wipe my sweaty palm on my sweatpants and hold my hand out for her to shake. “Yeah, hi. I’m Ty.”

She takes it, and despite her smile and friendly greeting, her presence is a strong one. And overwhelming.

“Nice to meet you, Tyler,” she says. “We’ve heard much about you over the years.” She steps back, and her eyes linger on the healing cut under my eye and the bruising along my jaw. But her expression quickly changes from assessing back to pleasant as she gestures to the tall man beside her. “This is David, Luca’s father.”

I nod and hold my hand out for him as well. He takes it with a firm shake, his presence equally as daunting even though he hasn’t said anything yet. Even to Luca.

“Pleasure,” he says with a smile that doesn’t meet his eyes.

“And these are my sisters,” Luca says, thankfully interrupting this warm fucking greeting. “Mia and Nadia.”

I turn to face them, and they smile warmly at me. I recognize them from fights back home, and the pictures Luca has of them in the apartment.

“It’s great to finally meet you, rather than just watching you punch my brother in the face,” Luca’s older sister, Mia, says with a chuckle.

Nadia laughs. “Even though he deserves it.”

I smile back at them and chuckle as well. “Can’t argue with that.”

Luca rolls his eyes, but I see a smile tugging at his lips as he looks between me and his sisters. It’s obvious how much he loves them, even from the couple minutes we’ve all been standing here.

Clara sighs, shaking her head as she turns to Luca. “So you’re planning to go out like that then?”

Luca looks down at his light purple button-up and gray dress pants, then back up at her with a confused expression. “Yes?”

She sighs again and gestures to the bruising around each of his eyes. “I mean this.”

“Well, what exactly do you want me to do about it, Mom, it’s my face.” He stares back at her, waiting for her answer, but all she does is sigh *again* and turn away from him.

“Well, we’ll get to that later.” She then slaps her smile back on and looks around at everyone. “Are we ready to go then?”

Anger starts to creep in as I take in this interaction, and I bite my tongue to keep from saying anything. They bust in here unannounced, despite what Luca wanted, and now she's making shitty comments about his face without even acknowledging that those injuries are from winning a brutal fucking fight and getting one step closer to his dream?

It's a good fucking thing I'm not going tonight.

"You're not joining us?" David says, looking at me and letting his eyes fall to my sweatpants and hoodie.

"Uh, no," I say, shaking my head and bringing my eyes to Luca so I don't have to look at this asshole. "I'm going to the gym–"

"Nonsense," David says, "you'll come. Who doesn't like a good meal out on the town? Good thing we're early then so you can change. We'll wait."

David puts his hands in his pockets and watches me, like he's just waiting for me to protest. And if I didn't know exactly what kind of manipulative dick he is, I *might* be intimidated. But I'm not, and I just stare back at him as an intense urge rises within me to knock him down a few fucking pegs.

But Luca steps forward and presses a hand to my chest, pushing me backwards towards the bedroom. "Give us a sec," he says to them over his shoulder, then closes the bedroom door behind us.

He immediately goes to the closet and starts rummaging around in it.

"I'm not fucking going, am I?" I ask, positive that would be a very bad idea.

Luca turns to face me. "Trust me, neither of us want that. But it's happening." Then he holds a shirt out for me.

And I know he's right. I can't say no, because then it would just be worse for Luca. He *does* want to work it out with them, so I can't be a complete ass the first time I meet them. But I also can't help but wonder why they'd invite me out to a dinner that was planned for them to discuss their issues. Unless they don't actually plan on doing that, and having me there is a way for them to avoid hearing Luca out.

My eyes drop to the baby blue button-up he's holding out for me, and I immediately shake my head. "No."

He looks down at the shirt, then shrugs. "Would you rather pink?"

I look behind him at the rainbow of fucking pastel colors in his closet and sigh, yanking the shirt out of his hand. "This is fucking embarrassing."

“It’s *blue*, you’ll live,” Luca says. “Do you even have a nice shirt?” He moves to the other side of the closet where my clothes are hanging and starts rifling around.

“Yeah, but it’s at my place,” I say as I pull the shirt on and almost wince in pain from the brightness of it.

Luca throws a pair of dress pants on the bed, and I’m surprised to see they’re actually black. “Well…” he says, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. “You should bring it here.” He watches me as I finish buttoning the shirt. “You should bring all of your stuff here.”

I look up at him and he smiles softly at me. “Tigers may be solitary creatures who roam across large areas… but they do coexist with other predators.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “And what kind of predator are you?”

He chuckles and shrugs one shoulder. “I caught and tamed you, so I’m the strongest of them all.”

I huff out a breath of laughter and grab the dress pants from the bed. But before I pull them on, I look into his soft hazel eyes and give him a small nod. “I can bring my stuff here.”

Luca smiles widely, but then suddenly holds out a hand with wide eyes. “Wait.”

I pause just as I’m about to step into the pants. “What?”

He turns around, pulls a drawer open and starts rooting around in it. Then he turns back to me with a smile, holding the tiger boxers and his unicorn socks. He kicks his shoes off, and tosses the boxers at me.

“Put those on. We’re going to need all the strength we can get.”

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THIRTY-TWO

I TAKE a sip of my expensive-as-fuck scotch, and Ty fidgets with his glass beside me. He looks so out of place in this upscale restaurant, as his eyes nervously dart around the table and his leg bounces. But damn… he looks good in baby blue.

"Another, sir?" the waiter asks me, as he gestures to my scotch glass and clears my appetizer plate.

I take the last swig and smile. "Please. And he'll take another as well," I say as I gesture to Ty. My parents are paying, so we may as well rack up the bill. Who doesn't like a nice meal out on the town, right?

"Right away," the waiter nods and leaves with our empty plates.

Ty's eyes meet mine and I chuckle. He looks like he's still trying to process what just happened and has no idea what to do.

"So," Mia leans forward and smiles at Ty, "I need to know. How long did it take to go from hate to love with him?" She jerks a thumb at me. "Probably a long time, right? He's pretty annoying."

Ty chuckles and nods. "Very. Still makes me question the whole thing most days."

Mia laughs, and Nadia chuckles beside me. I roll my eyes and cross my arms as I lean back in my chair. But I can't be mad, and bite back a smile instead. Because seeing Ty get along with my sisters so well is worth every dig they make at me.

"And I never did get to officially congratulate you both on making it into LFA," Mia says with a big smile. "And how exciting that it's in Vegas. I'm hoping I can get some time off to come watch."

“I want to come too,” Nadia pipes up. Then she smiles. “Vegas sounds exciting.”

“You’re not old enough for Vegas to be exciting,” I say, pushing her iced tea closer to her. She rolls her eyes and pushes her drink back to where it was on the table, and I laugh. “But I still want you there, iced tea and all.”

Nadia scoffs, but she can’t hide her smile. And I can’t either. Having my sisters at LFA will be fucking awesome.

I turn back to Mia. “We’re actually finding out early next week who we’re going to be fighting. And dare I say…” I shift my gaze to Ty, “I’m kind of hoping for a grappler.”

Ty smirks at me as excitement swirls in his eyes.

“Luca, please,” Mom says with an exasperated sigh from across the table. “Not here.”

I try to keep the swell of anger at bay as I slap on an innocent expression. “Not here what?”

“We don’t need to talk about fighting at the dinner table,” she glances at the table next to us, as if they are listening to our conversation. “It’s bad enough you have two black eyes.” Her eyes flick between me and Ty, but then she aims a disapproving look my way.

I let out a breath of laughter. “Right, of course. Why would we ever talk about something that makes me happy?”

“Luca, enough,” Dad says in a low voice as he glares at me.

I take a deep breath, trying my hardest to stay calm and prepare myself to just get into it. They obviously now know about LFA, since Mia must have told them earlier, but they don’t know about my job yet.

But before I can say anything, the waiter arrives with our drinks and main courses.

As he sets them in front of us, I take another breath in and Ty turns to look at me. And as I look into his eyes, I find the courage I need as his words echo in my mind. I need to escape this hold they have on me. I can take a hit and keep moving forward.

Pissing them off in the process is just the cherry on top.

“So, Tyler,” Mom says cheerily as the waiter sets down the last plate in front of my dad. “Tell us more about yourself. You’re from Stockton, right?”

Ty nods. “Yes.”

“Hm.” Mom nods, picking up her fork. “Have you been back to visit your family since you moved here? Or are you as busy as Luca and also can’t find the time?”

For fuck’s sake.

Ty’s brow furrows as he stares back at her. “No, I haven’t,” he says flatly. “I’m not able to visit my family anyway. I don’t know where my parents are, and my brother, who raised me, is in prison.”

I smile as a look of horror flashes over my mother’s face and my dad eyes Ty like he’s trying to figure out if that was a joke.

“Oh… I see.” Mom looks down at her meal and delicately picks up a forkful of salad. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that.”

Ty glances at me quickly with a *what the fuck* look in his eyes, and I chuckle. He didn’t have to say that, but I know he did it to shut them up after that uncalled-for comment about me not visiting them.

But Dad continues. “And what is it you do for work?”

“I’m a mechanic,” Ty says simply, looking down at his row of forks next to his plate and cautiously selecting the wrong one.

I slap the back of his wrist so he drops the dessert fork and I point to the right one. Ty shoots me a look that promises I’ll pay for that later, and I smile at him. I fucking hope I do.

“Ah,” Dad says, watching us with brows drawn together. “And you like it?”

“Yes,” Ty says, picking up the dinner fork.

And I have to chuckle as my parents continue to look at him, waiting for more. But it’s not coming.

So, my turn.

“Speaking of work,” I say, piercing my steak with my fork. “I got a new job. I was offered the Phys. Ed. position at the school I sub at. And I accepted. So I’m now permanent, full-time.”

Nadia gasps and grabs my arm. “That’s awesome! Congratulations!”

Mia smiles widely at me. “I knew you’d get it.”

My mother’s gaze turns icy as she glares at me, and slowly shakes her head. “Luca, are you serious…”

“Very.” I nod, taking a bite of my steak. “I love that school.”

She sighs and rubs her forehead with her hand.

“What?” I ask, needing her to get the fuck on with this so I can get out of here.

Mom shakes her head, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “We’ll talk about this after, this is not the place–”

“No,” I say, shaking my head right back at her. “We’ll talk about it now.” I stare at her as she gives me the warning look I’ve become so accustomed to growing up. The look that says to stop this right now and smarten up. But joke’s on her. I’ve got my fucking unicorn socks on and my man wearing his tiger boxers beside me. I’m smartened all the way up, and ready to fucking do this.

And when Mia sends a little smile and a nod my way, I find even more courage to finish this.

“We’ve done so much for you, to get you this opportunity at Sterling,” Mom says, her voice still low. “And you’re really just going to throw it all away?”

“Considering I never wanted it, I don’t think I’m throwing anything away.” I shrug, and take a drink of my scotch.

“Luca.” Mom glares at me. “You never even gave it a chance. Do you not want to succeed? Do you not want to push yourself to learn new skills and be the best you can be in something you enjoy?”

I laugh. I fucking *laugh.* Because that’s all I can do. Ty looks at me with a cocked eyebrow, and I know he is thinking exactly what I am.

“Mom,” I shake my head and take a deep breath, “you’re going to hate this, but guess what? I’m already doing that. I’m in a job I love more than anything, and I push myself in MMA every fucking day. Every day I’m in the gym, I’m learning something new and pushing myself to be the best I can be. And it paid off, because I’ve been accepted into an elite event that is only going to open more doors. So, yes,” I lean back in my chair and cross my arms, “I do want to succeed. And I’m going to.”

Mom sets her fork down and looks to my dad, shaking her head. “I don’t even know what to do anymore…” she mutters.

“So, that’s what you’re going to do with your life then?” Dad says to me. “Teach gym at an underfunded public school and make pennies with no opportunity for growth? And continue to chase this silly dream of MMA, so that you look like *this*.” He gestures to my face. “All so you can say you’re learning new skills? And what happens when you end up with a serious brain injury and ruin your entire life? We’ve been more than supportive as we let you get this out of your system, but it’s time to wake up and make some smart choices.”

I feel Ty tense beside me, and I try my hardest not to completely lose it on my dad right here in this restaurant.

“This silly little dream I’m chasing is teaching me more skills than any private school could. I’ve learned more about life and myself in MMA than I ever did in the years I attended Browning, so like hell will I be teaching there, or in any private school.” I look between my mom and dad as their disapproving glares attempt to break me. “It takes a lot of courage to stand up for yourself and control a fight,” I say. “Even more to defend yourself against an attack. MMA is the only thing that taught me that.” I pick up my glass and hold it up in a cheers motion. “And it’s certainly coming in handy right now.”

The entire table is silent as my parents just stare back at me, and I take a drink of my scotch. Nadia shifts her weight in her seat beside me, and Mia gives me another little nod of approval.

“Luca, I’m not going to sit here and take this.” Dad shoots daggers at me. “We’ve done nothing but try to help you. Everything we do is for you and your future, and you’re pissing all over it. Grow the fuck up and–”

“Why is his happiness such a threat to you?”

All eyes land on Ty, and silence once again takes over the table. But Ty just continues to calmly keep eye contact with my dad, waiting for his answer.

“Tyler,” my mom sighs, “I don’t think you understand–”

“I understand.” Ty nods. “I understand that Luca is succeeding at achieving *his* goals and you don’t like that he’s staying true to himself. I also understand that Luca is a great teacher, and his school loves him so much that they encouraged him to apply for this position, despite it being very competitive. And he got it. I also understand that he’s the hardest working fighter I know, and without him, I wouldn’t even be here. He put everything he had into helping me when my career almost ended, and in case you were ever going to ask him about it, his opponent in the last fight was the guy who was responsible for that. And he won. He’s strong, resilient, honest, driven and the most selfless man I know. I love him for exactly who he is. I’m not sure why you can’t do that.”

Silence once again falls over us, as Nadia presses her lips together with a smile and Mia takes a drink of her wine, glancing between Mom and Dad.

And Dad looks like he's going to jump across the table and rip Ty's head off. But Mom places her hand over his, while keeping her eyes on Ty.

And you know what? I think this is a great place to stop. Those are the perfect parting words, and nothing else needs to be said.

I stand up and drain the last of my scotch. As I set my glass down on the table, I give my parents a nod. "Well, thanks for dinner, but we're going to head out. I think everything that needed to be said was said."

I gesture for Ty to follow me and I leave the table, heading out of the restaurant. I push the door open, taking a deep breath of the crisp evening air and stop on the sidewalk, turning to face Ty.

He shakes his head and sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Sorry, I just–"

But I don't let him finish as I pull him into a kiss. I hold him tight against me, kissing him with everything I have as a thank you for being on my side, and for loving me.

"Oh my god."

We break our kiss as Mia and Nadia exit the restaurant with huge smiles on their faces.

Mia pulls Ty into a hug, and Ty looks at me with wide, panicked eyes. And I just chuckle, watching him as he slowly lifts his arms to gently pat her back.

"That was amazing," Mia says as she releases him. "They're still just sitting there in stunned silence."

Nadia laughs and looks up at me. "I think you did it this time."

I smile and look at Ty with a little shrug. "I had some help."

"How about we let them chew on that for a bit," Mia says, looking down the bustling downtown road at the neon bar signs. "I think it's time us four went out for some real fun."

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THIRTY-THREE

"I'LL GRAB DRINKS," Luca says as he heads to the bar, and Mia and Nadia pull me to the lounge area.

I look around the crowded bar, which is loud and chaotic, and thank my lucky fucking stars we're sitting at a table and not heading for the dance floor. But even as we take our seats, I pull at the collar of my shirt as a feeling of discomfort settles within me. I'm not a fan of crowded, busy places, and this fucking shirt isn't helping either.

"So, Luca dressed you?" Mia asks me with a smile.

"That obvious?" I say with a breath of laughter.

Nadia leans forward with a serious expression. "At least it wasn't pink."

I shake my head with a sigh. "He tried."

They both laugh, and immediately I feel more at ease. I'm not sure how Clara and David managed to have such nice kids when they are such assholes.

"For real though, Ty," Mia reaches across the table and places her hand on my forearm, "thank you. You have no idea what Luca has been through with our parents. While they do genuinely love and want the best for him, they just place so much pressure on him. All because he marches to the beat of his own drum. And that pressure has been building in him for a long time, so it was bound to blow up sooner or later. So, thank you for being here for him, and helping him through this."

I nod, looking down at her hand on my arm. "He helped me first."

Nadia smiles. "Not surprised to hear that."

Luca arrives at the table, setting down four glasses. “This place is fucked. Twelve dollars for a beer? Ty, you’ll need to earn your keep tonight.”

I roll my eyes and grab my beer from him, aiming a knowing look at Mia. “That drum has a pretty annoying beat though.”

Mia tips her head back with a laugh and holds up her drink. “Cheers to that.”

Luca eyes me, then shifts his gaze to Nadia as he passes a drink to her. “I still don’t know how I feel about you having a fake ID and drinking in a bar.”

She takes a drink and waves him off. “I’m twenty-one in three months. And *you* drank at my age.”

He slides into the seat beside me, still giving her an assessing look. “Yeah, but… still,” he mutters.

“So.” Mia crosses her arms on the table, looking at Luca. “Before we get into the celebration… how are you doing after all of that? It was fucking awesome and deserved, but are you ok?”

I turn my head to Luca, and I can’t say I haven’t been wondering the same thing since we left the restaurant. He hasn’t said anything about it yet, but he seems fine.

“Fuck yeah I am,” Luca says with a huge smile. “It was time. And now that it’s done, I feel fucking *fantastic*.”

“Good.” Nadia smiles. “And if they’re still not on board?”

Luca just shrugs. “They don’t have a choice. I’m keeping my job, I’m going to LFA and I’m getting into the fucking UFC. If they don’t like it, then too bad for them.”

I smile at him, taking in just how light and carefree he is right now. The stress he’s been carrying is now officially gone, and there is nothing but joy written all over his face.

“Good for you.” Mia leans over and pulls Luca into a hug. “I’m proud of you.” When she pulls back from him, she looks at me. “And you.”

Surprise takes over as I stare back at her. “What?”

She chuckles. “Making it into LFA within weeks of returning from an almost career-ending injury?” Mia smirks playfully at me. “That’s something to be proud of.”

I just continue to stare back at her, not sure what to say. I don’t think I’ve ever had someone tell me they were proud of me. And she barely even

knows me…

“Thank you,” I say, a little too softly. But she hears it and gives me another warm smile.

Luca gives me a soft nod, then turns back to the table. “So, we’re all in agreement that baby blue is Ty’s color, right?”

Mia and Nadia laugh, and I close my eyes with a sigh.

“Fuck no,” I say. “And this is the last time you will ever see me wear it.”

“Hm,” Luca hums as his eyes trail down my arms. “No, I think not.”

“It does look really nice with your dark features.” Nadia shrugs and holds back a smile.

“Not you too,” I mutter as I take a drink of my beer, and Luca high-fives Nadia across the table.

We finish our drinks and get another round, and as we sit around the table and talk, I feel completely at ease and comfortable. Mia talks about her work and how insane it is being an emergency room doctor, and Nadia shares stories of pre-med and gushes about her boyfriend. They ask Luca and I about the gym and training, work and just… life. Like they genuinely want to know. And I find myself easily sharing these things with them, and letting them in. I’m having fun, and it feels good.

Until Mia stands up and gestures to the dance floor. “Alright, let’s go. It’s time.”

“Yes!” Nadia jumps up as well.

I shake my head as Luca also stands. “No.”

He nods. “Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Fuck off.”

“That’s not as much fun on my own, so, no.”

I continue to glare up at Luca as I remain seated. “I don’t dance.”

His lips tilt up in a smirk. “You’re doing the tiger a great injustice as the symbol of bravery.”

My jaw tics as I continue to shoot daggers at him, but Nadia steps in front of him and grabs my hand.

“Come on,” she says, pulling me so I stand. “You have to.”

“I don’t,” I grumble as she continues to pull me towards the dance floor.

Once we get there and she lets go of me, I immediately turn around to return to my seat. But I come face to face with a grinning Luca.

“Hey there, Tiger.”

I sigh and try to step around him, but he blocks my way. “Uh-uh.” He shakes his head. “Be brave.” Then he gasps. “Oh my god. Of *course* you would have a hard time with this. Ok, so, dancing is when you move your body in a rhythmic way to–”

“Fuck off, Mitchell.” I turn to find another way to escape through the crowded dance floor, but he grabs my arm with a laugh.

And as I turn back to him, I’m met with sparkling eyes and a huge grin.

He looks *so* happy.

I look into his eyes, and sigh again. I’m going to deeply, deeply regret this.

As I step closer to him, his hand lands on my waist and he pulls me against him. He’s still smiling as he lightly brushes his lips over mine. “Tigers have two distinct personality types.”

“Do they now…” I murmur as he moves his lips along my jaw to my ear.

“Mm-hm.” He presses his body closer to mine, and his other hand slides up my side. “Majesty or steadiness.”

I take a deep breath in as he starts to slowly move to the thumping beat of the music, and he presses his lips to the skin under my ear.

“Steadiness can be compared to introversion in humans. They’re withdrawn, gentle, loving and friendly.”

My hands lift to his hips, not exactly sure where he’s going with this. He runs his hand up my chest and to my neck as he continues kissing along my jaw, and I feel myself giving in to his touch.

“Majesty is compared to extraversion. They’re dignified, confident, fierce and aggressive.”

He pulls back just enough so he can look into my eyes, and gives me a lopsided smile. “You’re a majestic tiger. Now dance with me, fucker.”

Our lips crash together as he pulls me tighter against him. My hands grip his hips tight, and he holds the back of my neck as we fall into a desperate kiss. The beat of the music urges us on as we take everything we can from each other on this crowded dance floor, and I give everything up to him. I let his hands guide me as I run mine up his sides and over his

chest, and his tongue slides along mine. Everything around us starts to fade away, as I get completely lost in Luca fucking Mitchell.

Until a loud voice sounds from somewhere close by.

“Fucking faggots.”

I freeze, and Luca stills as well, holding onto me tightly.

“Take that gay shit somewhere else.”

Luca pulls back from me, turning his head towards a group of three guys at a table near the perimeter of the dance floor.

“The fuck did you just say?” I ask, rage quickly building inside me.

“I don’t want to see that shit,” one of the guys says with a look of disgust. “Fuck off and find a gay bar somewhere.”

Luca smiles and takes a step towards them. “Know of any? You look like you get around.”

“Fuck you,” the guy says, slamming his beer down and pushing to his feet.

“No thanks, I get my fuckings from him.” Luca points a thumb over his shoulder at me. “But we can totally help you find a nice man to take home. What’s your type?”

The guy starts to come at Luca, but I step forward to press a hand to his chest, pushing him back.

“Ah, tough fucking homos, huh?” He looks into my eyes with a smirk as he steps closer to me.

One of the other guys laughs. “Maybe not so tough. Looks like someone already put them in their place.”

The guy before us laughs as well as he takes in the cuts and bruises on our faces. “And you didn’t even learn your lesson...”

I hear Mia and Nadia calling to us from the dance floor, but neither of us turn around as we continue to stand off against these idiots.

Until Luca places a hand on my chest and points between them. “Wait a second. I think I know you guys.”

The prick standing before us scoffs. “Like fuck you do.”

“Yeah.” Luca nods. “Ty, doesn’t he look familiar?” He turns his head to me with a smile. “Kinda looks like he’s trying to prey on a tiger.”

“Oh yeah,” I say thoughtfully, observing him. “Thought I recognized him… he’s a d-hole.”

Luca nods seriously. “A definite d-hole.”

“What the fuck did you just call me?” The guy steps closer, but we ignore him.

“And you know what we do with d-holes,” Luca says to me. Then he turns to the guy and tilts his head, looking him up and down. “Especially angry d-holes.”

The guy lifts his fist to punch Luca, but Luca moves faster. He grabs his wrist and hooks his leg behind the asshole’s knee, sending him straight down to the floor and flat on his back. As Luca drops his knee to the guy’s hips to keep him down, he uses his grip on his wrist to pull him into an armlock.

“Fuck! Fuck, ow, get off!” the guy yells as he tries to wiggle out of it, which only causes him more pain as Luca simply holds him there.

“You fucking asshole.” His loudmouth buddy gets up from the table, but I step in his way.

“Oh, you wanna fucking go?” the cocky prick asks. “I’ll give you two black eyes, just like your little fuck buddy over there.”

“Little!?” Luca calls from the floor as he continues to hold his guy down. “Who the fuck are you calling little? I’m taller than you!”

Just as I turn back to face the guy before me, he reaches out to grab the collar of my shirt and lifts his other fist to strike me. But I quickly duck my head, push my shoulder into his belly and wrap my arm around his leg. And when I pull up on his leg, I send him down to the floor with his friend. But he doesn’t let go of my shirt, and it rips open as he goes down.

“Not the baby blue!” Luca yells.

As the guy tries to get back up, I drop to my knees, grab his arm to turn him around and pull him against me in a rear naked choke.

“Fuck!” the guy yells as I pull tight.

“Time for you to learn *your* fucking lesson,” I say in his ear as I pull even tighter, and he winces as he gasps for air.

Luca’s guy is still screaming, and as I look over at him Luca rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Such a baby.”

“Watch out, security is coming!” someone yells to us, so Luca and I release the bastards and stand.

I look at the third guy, still sitting at the table, and he just holds up his hands in surrender and shakes his head with wide eyes.

Luca turns to me with a smile as the guys at our feet slowly try to get up. There’s an intense heat in his eyes as he smiles widely. “We should go

now, right?”

“Yeah,” I say as I move towards him, purposefully stepping on one of the guys’ hands. “Looks like you need a good fucking.”

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THIRTY-FOUR

“ALRIGHT,” I say as I exit the bathroom, drop my shirt to the floor and hold my hands out wide. “Fuck me.”

Ty looks up at me from his seat on the edge of the bed. “Did your sisters get back to their hotel?”

“Yeah,” I nod. “Mia texted, they’re good.” And I can’t help but smile, because he’s thinking of them. Even though he should be thinking about getting all up in my ass. But I like that he cares about their safety, so it’s an odd mix of feelings.

And as my eyes fall to his torn baby blue shirt, sadness also pushes its way in. Because I wouldn’t have minded him fucking me while wearing that.

I point to the shirt as it hangs off his shoulder. “We’re going to have to get you another one of those.”

“No,” he shakes his head, “we won’t.”

“Yeah,” I nod, “we will.”

And since he’s not coming to get me as I stand here offering myself to him, I drop my pants and step out of them. “Do I really have to say it again?”

And Ty just continues to stare up at me.

“What?” I ask. “Oh, you want to be fucked?” I nod thoughtfully. “Kind of got my ass all excited, but yeah, we can do that.”

But as soon as I reach out to push his torn shirt off him, he grabs my wrist and stands. He steps into my space, looking into my eyes with a fiery need.

“You gained control tonight,” he says in a low voice, his eyes dropping to my lips.

My heart skips a beat as I take in the dangerous tone of his voice, and his tight grip on my wrist.

“I did,” I say as I try to pull my wrist from his grasp, but he just grips me tighter. And now that excited feeling is morphing into a need to flip him over and show him who’s in charge here.

His lips tilt up in a soft smirk as my eyes narrow. “But you know that I’m still in control here, right?”

“Like fuck you are,” I say as I lift my elbow to rotate out of his grip, but he quickly lifts his other hand to grasp my upper arm and keep me here.

“No?” he steps closer. “I think I am. Because when you have my fingers or my cock in your ass, you’ll do anything I say, won’t you?” His lips lightly brush over mine, and I try my hardest to keep my expression indifferent and not show him that this is totally getting me hot.

Although my hard cock in my boxers is probably giving that away.

“So,” Ty releases my upper arm and slides his hand around my back and over my ass, “how many fingers do you think you can take this time, Mitchell? All of them?”

Oh, shit.

My heart thunders as my breathing becomes heavy, and I look into his dark eyes.

He smirks. “I’m not the only one who likes a challenge.”

Well, fuck him, using my words against me. But not really, because while I may have challenged him to let go and take my cock in his ass, he does *not* need to challenge me for this. I am *all* in.

I smile back at him. “On one condition.”

His eyes darken, but he stays quiet, waiting to hear what I have to say.

“You keep the tiger boxers on.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment as he just continues to stare back at me. “Seriously?”

I nod. “Dead serious. You know what they do to me.”

He blows out a breath, and his eyes drop to my feet.

But I forcefully pull my wrist from his grasp. “Don’t even fucking think about it.”

“I don’t know if I can do this with you wearing those,” he says.

I wiggle my toes in my unicorn socks and give him a sweet smile. “Thought you liked a challenge?”

He glares at me, and before I can say anything else, he grabs me and pushes me onto the bed on my back. His fingers slip into the waistband of my boxers, and he pulls them down over my legs. Once they’re off, I quickly pull my feet away from his grabby hands. I remember his tactics from the last time he tried to sneakily remove my magic socks. He’s not getting them this time.

He rolls his eyes as I wrap my hands around the bands of my socks and eye his fingers.

“You know how ridiculous this is, right?” he asks.

“No.” I shake my head at him, then gesture with my chin for him to drop his pants. “Let me see the goods.”

Ty sighs, but he does it anyway. And after he’s stripped all his clothes off, and is standing before me in just his magnificent tiger boxers, I release a long breath. Damn… I’m going to have to get him a pair for every day of the week.

“Oh yeah,” I nod, releasing my feet and bringing one hand to my cock, “that’s what I’m talking about.”

He crawls onto the bed, straddling my hips as he grabs my hand from my cock and pins it over my head. “Shut up.”

He lowers his lips to mine and pushes his tongue into my mouth as he grinds against me. And immediately I want more. I move my free hand down his back, grabbing his ass and pulling him into me as I grind up into him. And as he moves his lips down my neck and onto my nipple, I’m absolutely desperate.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I tip my head back and get lost in the feeling of him against me.

Until he releases my nipple from his mouth and looks up at me. “Turn around.”

And I almost knock him off the bed as I roll over.

Excitement stirs as Ty reaches into the bedside table to grab the lube, and I prepare myself for what he’s about to do to me. He’s been pushing me further and further with his fingers, and I can’t lie and say I haven’t thought about what his whole fist would feel like. I want him to push me to my limits and see how much I can take… to prove how much I can take.

Before Ty pours any lube on his fingers, he brings his mouth to my ass and licks my hole. It sends an immediate zing of electricity up my spine, and I moan into the bed. He continues to lick and push his tongue into me as I push back against him. But before I can get too into it, he pulls away with a chuckle.

"Begging for it already," he says as he lubes up his fingers.

I look over my shoulder at him. "Fucking right I am, hurry up."

He gives me a look of warning as he brings his hand to my ass and rubs the lube over my hole. Then he shoves two fingers inside me.

My head drops with a moan, and the intense pressure, stretch and pleasure takes over as I forget to be mad at that sudden move. Ty doesn't let up at all, fucking me with his fingers and increasing speed until I'm literally begging for more. He continues to work me, adding another finger to build me up and stretch me, and by the time he has four fingers inside me, I'm on my hands and knees, grinding back onto his hand.

"You look so fucking good with my fingers in your ass," Ty says as his fingers glide in and out of me with ease.

I moan and look over my shoulder at him, as he kneels between my legs and watches his fingers in my ass with a feral look on his face. His dick is solid and straining against the tiger print of his boxers, and fuck… I feel like it's not going to take much more for me to come.

My eyes slide up to meet his, and the corner of his lips tilt up. "Can you take more?"

I breathe out and nod eagerly. "Yes."

"I knew you could," he says as he keeps his eyes on mine and lowers his mouth to lightly bite the flesh of my ass. "What a good fucking boy."

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

His words, his teeth, and the feeling of his thumb tucking into his palm and pushing into my ass with the rest of his fingers… I'm in fucking sensory overload and I *love it*. My head drops back down to the bed as I let the intense, pleasurable burn take over. All five of his fingers are in my ass, and it's not enough. I want it all.

And as he pours more lube onto his hand and my ass, I let the ripple of excitement course through me.

I groan into the bed and push back against him. "All the way."

I hear Ty release a breath as he gently wiggles his fingers inside me and I groan at the intense feeling.

“You sure?” he asks, his voice sounding almost as desperate as I feel.

“Yes,” I pant as I push up onto my hands again. “Do it.”

And he does. He slowly pushes further into me, taking his time to stop and rotate his wrist, wiggle his fingers and bring me an intense amount of fucking pleasure. But it’s nothing compared to when his fist finally pushes all the way into my ass.

A loud moan escapes me as an intense feeling of fullness and pressure flows through me and I surrender complete control of my body to Ty. The pleasure radiating from my ass is the only thing I can process right now, and I can’t even form a coherent thought.

“I knew you could take my whole hand,” Ty says as he moves his fingers inside me and runs his other hand over my lower back. “You’re so fucking good for me.”

“Fuck,” I mumble, the pressure almost unbearable in the best fucking way possible, and his words send a ripple of intense satisfaction throughout my entire body.

And as his knuckle rubs over my prostate, I can barely fucking take it.

I let out a loud moan and rock back into him, my head dropping between my shoulders as he does it again.

“Hm, you like that?” Ty asks, doing it again, and again lighting up every nerve in my body and pulling an uncontrollable string of moans and groans from me. He groans as well, rotating his hand in my ass. “Fuck, I love hearing you moan.”

I’m completely lost to him as he fucks my ass with his fist, moving it back and forth, in and out, rubbing my prostate in a way that applies a constant pressure to it that is unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. I’m completely at his mercy, and he can do whatever the fuck he wants to me right now.

He slides his hand out of my ass and pushes me so I roll onto my back. My body feels like jelly as I just stare up at him, unable to even think right now.

“I need to see you when you come,” Ty says as he drops to his knees on the floor and grabs my hips to pull me to the edge of the bed. His hand slides right back into my ass and I’m once again overcome with ecstasy.

“Oh, fuck, Ty,” I grunt as he moves his hand in my ass, and his other starts stroking my cock. “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

And with one more thrust from his fist against my prostate, I'm coming harder than I ever have before. The added pressure from his entire fucking hand inside me magnifies every sensation as he strokes my cock and I lose all control of my body. I'm moaning uncontrollably as my muscles all tremble, and I enter a state of pure euphoria.

I look down as I'm finally able to see straight again, and Ty leans forward, running his tongue over the cum on my abs as he slowly slides his hand out of me. I moan at the oddly satisfying feeling, leaving me empty and… still hard.

Ty looks up at me and smiles. "Still want to get fucked?"

I nod as I smile back at him. "Fuck yeah."

He gets to his feet and starts to push his boxers down, but I quickly sit up and grab his wrist.

"What did I say?" I ask as I glare up at him.

He huffs as he stares back at me. "Really…"

I nod seriously, batting his hand away and pulling his boxers down just enough to free his cock. Then I lie back down on the bed. "There. Now fuck me, Tiger."

He takes a deep breath in with a slight shake of his head, and grasps his hard cock. Then he steps closer, and pushes into me.

And holy fucking shit. I'm going to come again, *right now*.

"Oh my god," I grunt as I grab his forearm. "Fuck, I'm going to come."

Ty groans as he thrusts into me, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth. My already sensitive ass is fucking loving this, and I don't think I can hold off.

And when he drops down to take my nipple into his mouth, I'm done.

"Fuck," I grunt loudly as I come, my fingers digging into his back as I feel his muscles tighten.

He groans as he looks down at my cock. "I'm coming too."

As he comes, I hold him tight against me and I take a deep breath. I take a moment to focus completely on him as I feel his muscles contract, his hot breath on my skin, and his heart beating wildly under my touch.

My wild fucking Tiger.

I fucking love him.

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THIRTY-FIVE

MY EYES open to sunlight streaming through the curtains and Luca's curls in my face. I blow them out of my mouth and look down at him, sprawled on top of me as usual with his face pressed into my neck. But he's sound asleep, so I need to take advantage of that and get up before he wakes. I can't do more forced cuddles.

I manage to slide out from under his arm and leg without disturbing him, and he stays asleep as I quietly exit the bedroom and close the door behind me. As I make my way into the kitchen to make coffee, I rub a hand over my face and yawn. It's 8:00 AM, and even though that's sleeping in for me, I'm still feeling tired after the events of last night. And we'll be headed to the gym later.

As the coffee brews, I stand in the kitchen and look out the window at the soft morning sky, letting my mind wander to last night. To Luca finally putting his parents in their place, the look on their faces when he didn't back down from their attempts to once again silence him, the complete relief and joy I could feel in him all night…

The bedroom door suddenly opens, and I turn to look at Luca standing in the doorway in his yellow boxers and unicorn socks. His hair is a complete disaster and he's squinting sleepily against the morning light.

"No," he says, glaring at me through squinted eyes.

"No, what?" I ask.

"You're supposed to cuddle me."

I sigh. "Why?"

Luca tilts his head and scoffs. “Um, because you wrecked my ass last night, so I deserve to be held?”

I shake my head, looking at the coffee maker wishing it would hurry the hell up. “You enjoyed it.”

“Just because I like it rough, that doesn’t mean I don’t also need some tender moments.” He eyes me as he walks to the couch, then points at it. “Come on.”

I stare back at him, arms crossed. “You want me to just… hold you?”

He sighs dramatically and tips his head back. “Oh my *god*. How is this so hard for you to understand? It *feels good*.”

“It does?” I ask, slowly walking over to him. The coffee is still brewing, so the second that’s done, I’ll be ending this fucking cuddle bullshit. “Because all I get is your hair in my mouth and your hot breath on my neck.”

He smiles as I stop before him. “You’ll learn to love it.”

“I don’t think I will.”

He points to the couch, and I sit down with a sigh.

But he just stares at me, like he’s waiting for something.

“What?” I ask, getting annoyed.

“Lie the fuck down!” he says, waving his hands in the air for me to lie down. “For fuck’s sake, this is like teaching a new cat old tricks.”

With another sigh, I lie down and choose to ignore whatever the fuck he just tried to say. I don’t want to prolong this anymore than I have to.

He happily lies down beside me and nuzzles into my chest. Then he looks up at me. “Come on, Ty. You know what to do.”

As my arms wrap around him and I hold him against me, Luca finally falls silent. The only sounds in the room are from the coffee brewing in the kitchen, and he lets out a contented sigh.

My gaze drifts out the window again as we lie here, and I look at the clouds in the sky. I count them, study them, and watch them drift away as I wait for this to be over.

Except the longer we lie here, I realize it’s not as uncomfortable as I thought it would be. It’s almost… nice.

Which is fucked.

I hear the coffee finish brewing and am happy for a reason to get up and end whatever this weird feeling is. But as I look down at Luca… he’s asleep.

I watch him for a moment, as he breathes deeply against my chest with his tattooed arm and leg draped over me, and my eyes land on the moon and stars tattoo. I trace each star with my eyes, until I reach out and do the same with my finger.

He stirs and looks up at me. “Hm?”

“You fell asleep,” I say, taking this opportunity to sit up.

“And?” He sleepily rubs his eyes with a yawn.

“And you said *cuddle*, not go back to sleep,” I say as I head into the kitchen. “Neither of which I wanted to do.”

Luca stands up with a chuckle. “Your lack of understanding around affection is astounding.”

I shoot him a glare as I grab two mugs and pour coffee into them.

He enters the kitchen and watches me. “You’ve got like, one stair left. And it’s an itty bitty baby step. Like not even a full step, you know?” His eyes follow me as I head to the fridge. “Out of *all* the stairs you’ve climbed, it’s so interesting that this is the hardest one.”

“I just don’t like to cuddle, what’s so wrong about that?” I ask, pouring cream in his coffee.

“I think you’ll like it once you give it a chance.” He nods seriously. “You didn’t think you liked dick until you tried it. This is no different.” He smiles widely. “So climb that last step, Ty. One last push to the finish line so you can pump your fist in the air, yell to the world that you cuddle like a fucking champion, because you are Tyler fucking Roscoe and you–”

“Shut up.” I shove his coffee into his hands.

He takes it, and smirks as he takes a sip.

“You know why I like to cuddle?” he asks.

I look back at him, waiting for his answer and expecting some kind of ridiculous reason why he needs his “tender moments.”

He smiles and steps closer, sliding a hand around my waist. “Because I love you, and I want to be close to you.”

I pause, letting him pull me against him. And as I look into his hazel eyes, a soft smile forms on my lips.

I guess I can try it again.

“Ty, Luca.”

I finish my combo on the bag and turn around to see Max beckoning me and Luca to his office. As I pull off my gloves and toss them on the bench, excitement stirs. He has our opponents for LFA. And I need to know who it is so I can work out what areas I should be training and make a plan for the next few weeks. I may still be in fighting shape from Dallas, but this is fucking Legacy Fighting Alliance. I’m in, and I’m no longer battling anything that could potentially hold me back from my ultimate goal. So I’m ready to fucking win this.

“My god.” Luca hops down from the ring where he was sparring with Seb and removes his gloves. “Fucking breathe, would you?”

I shoot him a look as I make my way to Max’s office, and he follows with a chuckle.

“Hey, guys.” Max smiles as we enter his office, and he closes the door behind us. “Take a seat.”

Luca and I each take a chair, and Max sits across from us.

“Looks like you guys are going back to your roots,” he says.

“You’re sending us home?!” Luca stares at Max with wide eyes.

“What? No.” Max looks between us with confusion. “I mean with your opponents and their fighting styles…”

“Oh, thank fuck.” Luca falls back in his chair and places his hand over his chest. “For fuck’s sake, Max, don’t play me like that.”

Max stares back at him, confusion still written all over his face.

“You were saying?” I ask him, ready to get to the point.

“Yeah.” Max turns to me, then smiles. “You have Jordan Mullen. Grappler.”

I smile. Just what I was hoping for.

“He fought in an LFA event almost a year ago and lost. But every fight since then, he’s won. His background is wrestling, so he’s a strong grappler.” Max leans back in his chair. “But you’re stronger. And now you’re also a striker who knows how to deal with a grappler. That’s a dangerous combination.” He smiles at me.

I nod. “I’m assuming he struggles to strike while off his feet?”

“You got it.” Max gives me a nod. “And you don’t. So, spend more time on the mats with defensive drills while also opening up opportunities to strike. It’ll be a good way to wear him down and give you the edge quickly.”

“Got it.” I take a deep breath, letting the excitement and anticipation settle. This is exactly the fight I want.

“Luca.” Max turns to him.

“Please say grappler.” He puts his hands together in a prayer motion in front of him.

Max laughs. “Striker.”

“Damn.” Luca dramatically drops his hands. Then a light bulb seems to go off. “Oh, my roots. Yeah, ok got it.”

Max shakes his head with another chuckle. “Cris Alvarez. He’s also new to the LFA scene, and hasn’t had as many events as you. So there’s not a lot to go off of for him. But from what I have seen and heard, he’s a counter-fighter. He stays on defense and carefully picks his shots. He waits, needing committed attacks from his opponent so he can set up his actions. So you need to fight with a complex offense. Think one step ahead, at all times.”

I look at Luca and smirk at him, and he rolls his eyes at me.

“Yeah, yeah,” he waves a hand in the air towards me, “I got that from this one.”

Max huffs out a laugh. “Read him, disrupt him, deny his counters, then you’re set up to step in and explode.”

Luca nods with a smile. “Fucking right.”

Max shakes his head and smiles. “When you first came here, you both had a goal of strengthening other areas of your fight and becoming complete fighters. And I thought you guys were going to kill each other in the process. But now…” he pauses for a moment, looking between us, “you’re complete fighters.”

“And in love,” Luca adds seriously.

“That too,” Max laughs. “Which I never saw coming.”

“Me either,” I murmur, and Luca rolls his eyes at me.

“But you guys are in a good place to take this fight,” Max says. “You’ve already showcased your talent in the last two fights, and now you really need to bring it for this one. UFC officials are sniffing around, and they’re going to be there.”

I perk up at those words, and Luca scoots to the edge of his seat, clearly catching that as well.

"*Are* sniffing around?" Luca asks. "Where, exactly…"

Max just fucking *shrugs.* "All I can say is that you've been noticed already." He then stands up and opens the door. "Let that fuel your fire, guys. They're coming to watch you."

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THIRTY-SIX

“MONSTER ATTACK!”

Happy screams from the second graders echo around the gym as I growl and put my hands over my head, entering monster mode.

“Get him!” Julian yells as he hastily puts his soccer ball away and starts running after me.

The kids all rush to the ball rack to put their equipment away while I stomp and growl after the few who are trying to bait me into catching them.

“Mmm, this one looks yummy,” I say, running after Olivia as she runs the opposite way of the rack.

She laughs with pure delight as I get closer to her. “Nooo!”

“Ah! Got you!” Julian jumps on my leg, and Silas jumps on the other one.

“Go put your ball away!” Silas yells to Olivia. “We need to take him down!”

Olivia scurries off to the ball rack as I make a show of being slowed down by two fifty-pound kids. “No, not my lunch!”

The kids all laugh as they run after me, the equipment now all put away, and I dramatically drop to my knees in the middle of the gym. “Ah! They got me!”

The cheers and laughs surround me as I let just a little bit of chaos ensue. They’re little, I can shake them off if needed. And as Parker literally climbs my arm, I laugh and push to my feet.

“Ok!” I put my hands in the air and smile around at everyone. “I’m back! Whew, that was a close one. I thought I might be stuck as the monster forever that time.”

“Mr. Mitchell.” Shyla looks up at me seriously. “We knew it was you the whole time.”

I wink at her and press my finger to my lips. “Shh.”

She laughs and I blow my whistle. “Alright, line up!”

I turn to the gym door as all the kids run to line up and head back to class, and I see Dan leaning against the wall with a very amused look on his face.

“I just had to see monster attack time for myself,” he says.

“And did you enjoy it?” I ask, standing beside him as his class finishes lining up in front of us.

“It was everything I imagined, and then some.” He shakes his head with a chuckle. “You’re brave.”

I shrug. “I’ve experienced worse.”

His eyes roam over my face, which is now almost completely healed since we’re nearing two weeks post-fight. “True.” He turns to his class. “Alright, let’s go.” But before he pushes the door open to take his kids back to his classroom, he smiles at me. “You coming to hockey tomorrow night?”

“You know it,” I say, holding out my fist for him to bump.

“Awesome. See you later,” he says as he pushes the door open, and his class follows him out of the gym.

After I’ve given everyone a high-five on their way out, I head into the office since I have a few minutes until my next class arrives, and check my phone. I have one missed text from Mia, about ten minutes ago.

MIA

Hey bud. Just checking in to see how everything is going. Have you heard anything from Mom and Dad?

With a sigh, I flop down onto my chair. I haven’t, and I’m not surprised. I sent them a pretty clear message. But I can’t help but feel a bit hurt that they haven’t said *anything* to me. Because they are letting go. Which is exactly what I feared would happen.

Not yet. Not sure if I will.

The bubbles immediately pop up to show she's texting back, and I just look down at my phone and wait.

> You will at some point. They're probably just processing everything you said. Because it's all valid, and they're going to realize this in their own time. Don't worry about them. Just keep kicking ass and enjoy the life you've made for yourself! You did the right thing.

Happy little voices fill the gym as my next class arrives, and I smile as I hear feet running across the floor.

> Thanks Mia. Gotta get back to work, talk soon. Love you.

I toss my phone down and head out into the gym to greet the kindergartners as they gather in the middle of the gym, ready to have some fun.

And we do. As we play Get On An Island and I take on an epic role as a shark to chase the kids onto their hula-hoop islands, everything else is forgotten.

I can't control what my parents think or do, but I can control my response to it.

And I know I made the right choice. For *me*.

I pull into the gym parking lot and see Ty getting out of his car. I park and hop out of my Jeep, smiling at him. "Arriving at the same time is so fun."

He huffs out a laugh as he slings his bag over his shoulder. "Glad to see you've adjusted well to working full-time hours."

I nod seriously, pulling my bag out of my back seat. "It's been an adjustment. I miss my quiet gym time before everyone gets in. Actually…" I pause as I close my Jeep door. "No… That's not true. It was super lonely." I look at Ty with shock and revelation. "I think I hated it."

Ty shakes his head and starts towards the gym entrance.

I catch up and walk beside him. "So," I smile, "hear back from your landlord?"

He nods. “Yeah. He found someone to take over my lease starting next month.”

I smack his arm and he glares at me.

“What, you just weren’t going to tell me?” I ask, in shock that he would keep this from me for so long.

He stares back at me. “I just heard from him like an hour ago, and we’ve been here for less than a minute.”

“Tyler,” I sigh. “That is the *first* thing you should tell me.”

He takes a deep breath in and slowly blows it out.

“So,” I smile at him, choosing to let this one go, “we getting your stuff this weekend then?”

He pauses at the gym door and looks at me with a nod. “Yeah.”

I scoff. “Way to sound excited.” Then I smile again. “Ty Roscoe… a deadly Tiger, cohabitating with the *most* deadly predator out there…”

Ty yanks the door open and rolls his eyes, heading into the gym.

I follow him with a chuckle. “And *I’m* excited, because I don’t know how much longer I can wait to see this fancy shirt I keep hearing so much about.”

He looks over his shoulder at me. “The one I mentioned once, and that you won’t shut up about?”

“That’s the one.” I nod. “Do you even know how many fantasies I’ve had about you fucking me while wearing it?” I give a nod and wave to Adão who looks between us with wide eyes as we pass him on our way to the locker room. “A lot. Because we didn’t get to do it with the baby blue, and trust me… if you came to bed wearing tiger boxers and a baby blue button-up, I would go feral. Absolutely fucking *feral*.”

We reach the locker room door, but I gasp and reach out to grab him before he can push it open.

“Oh my god…” I stare at him in shock. “Is it… is it baby blue? Is this why you’re holding out on me? Have you just been edging me this whole time?”

He furrows his brow at me. “Of course it’s fucking not. It’s–”

“Black,” we both say at the same time.

I sigh in disappointment. “Of course it is.”

Ty turns to push the door open, but before he does, his eyes linger on the mats. And I can already see the wheels turning as he runs through his training plan for tonight in his head.

We've come a long way together, and Ty especially has had some epic growth. But there are some things that will always remain. He's laser-focused, determined, an over thinker and planner, uptight, and fucking stubborn. But all these things I once hated about him, are now why I love him. They make him an excellent MMA fighter, an attentive and supportive boyfriend, and a great friend to everyone in this gym.

As I follow him into the locker room, I smile. We're headed into the biggest fight of our lives, and I know he's deep in his head. I wouldn't expect anything else. But we're not going to lose sight of everything we've worked on to get here. We're still going to have some fun, celebrate the progress we've made, and enjoy this wild ride. Together.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

I LAND on my back on the mat, and Rosa immediately moves over my hip, blocking it so she can take side control. But I stop her by getting my hook in behind her knee, and block her shoulder by bringing my arm over it.

"Head control!" Max yells from the side of the mat, but I'm already there.

With my arm over her shoulder, I pull her upper body down towards me so I can try to free my hip. She gets a grip on my outer arm, but I don't let her pull it into my midline. Because if she does, she then has control of both my hip *and* arm and I'll be fucked. I push against her just enough so I can try to slip my other arm between us, but she effectively blocks that as well by ducking under my arm and keeping it outside.

Fuck. I knew rolling with Rosa would force me to fight defensively, but… damn. I check that moment in my head, knowing that during my fight with Jordan Mullen he will be doing exactly this. Coming in hard to control the fight on the ground and forcing me onto my defense. But I can strike just as hard down here, and that was an open opportunity for a body shot.

As Rosa's head is still down, I use the arm that she blocked to push off the mat and set up a sweep. She attempts to gain control of my other arm as I push myself up into sitting, but when she misses it, she shifts to wrap her arm behind my neck in an attempt to put me in a hold.

And there's another perfect set up for a hit to the ribs, as they're left open right before me. If it was Mullen, I could strike, likely getting him off my hip so I could sweep, and move into side control.

But it’s not Mullen, and Rosa and I are not striking… and she has the upper hand right now.

“That’s it, Rosa! You got it!” Seb calls out.

No she fucking doesn’t.

I lean backwards against her hold around my neck, forcing her to fall forward with me so her balance is challenged. Once I’m on my back and her grip falls away from my neck, she places a knee over my hip as she attempts to pivot into side control. But while her knee keeps my hips from moving with her, my legs are free to block her. I wrap them around her lower leg so she can’t rotate on that knee, and pull her back over me. And there’s another strike opportunity as her ribs and face are left unprotected.

But because she’s smaller than I am, she simply just fucking pulls her leg out from between mine and rolls off of me.

“Get on her!”

I roll as well, immediately pushing onto my knees and catching her before she can get off her back, putting us in open guard. She gets her feet on my hips to keep me at a distance, but I have another plan. I bring my hands to her sides so she doesn’t get her arms in, and move to get a grip on one of them so I can sweep and move into back control. But the second I get a grip on her, her knee comes to my chest, and I have to rethink my plan.

“Time!” Max calls out.

I fall back on my butt on the mats and sigh.

Rosa sits up with a smile. “Close one.”

I laugh. “Not close enough. I’d say you took that one.”

Max nods. “Correct.”

Seb and Elijah clap and holler from the side of the mat. “Yeah, Rosa! Fucking beast!”

I shoot them a look, but I’m not able to hide my smile. Because it’s true. She had me scrambling.

“So,” Max looks at me, and I stand, “good defense. I want you to take this into the cage next week with Luca for light sparring. Think about wearing down the body with strikes so you can easily sweep.”

“And what if *I* wear *his* body down?” Luca leans over the ropes of the boxing ring, his sweaty curls sticking out everywhere as he smiles widely with his pink mouthguard. “I’m pretty damn good at that.”

“Does it have to be him?” I ask Max, and he laughs.

“You could ask Rosa,” he says with a smirk, and Rosa whirls around to face me.

She smiles. “Bring it, tough guy.”

“Hey,” Luca points a glove at Rosa, “back off. The only body he’ll be wearing down is mine.”

Rosa laughs and puts her hands up in surrender as I roll my eyes. And as Del finally manages to wrangle Luca back into work, I turn to the mat and run through mine and Rosa’s spar in my head again. I would have liked to keep going… when we were in open guard, I could have moved to my feet to avoid her knee to my chest. And then if she brought her hand to the back of my head, I could have–

“Hey.”

I turn to face Rosa as she places a hand on my arm and smiles up at me.

“What do you say we run through a few drills, or roll some more?” she asks. “Maybe from open guard? I could use some more work there.”

As I look down at her, I take in her eager smile and kind eyes. I know she’s saying this because she knows where my head is… but I also know it’s because she cares.

And I really appreciate it.

I smile back at her and nod. “Sounds good.”

Luca sets a box down on the living room floor with a huff, then stands up and puts his hands on his hips. He looks around at the one suitcase and three boxes we just carried up from my car.

“Wow, you really don’t have a lot of stuff.” He looks at me with a furrowed brow. “This is really it?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I didn’t take much with me from home and the place came furnished. And I’ve pretty much been living here for a few months now, so all my clothes are here.”

Luca smiles as he shakes his head, dramatically reaching into a box and pulling out my black button-up. “Not all of them.”

I stare back at him as he proudly holds it up with a massive grin on his face.

“Put it on,” he says.

“No.”

“Why? Because it’s black? Are we finally ready to experiment with color?” Luca looks me up and down, his eyes slowly raking over my gray sweatpants and black t-shirt as he cocks an eyebrow.

“No.”

He rolls his eyes and drops the shirt back into the box. “Fine, you can keep your t-shirt on for now. But you owe me a fuck while wearing that.”

He flops onto the couch and picks up the TV remote.

I open my mouth to ask him what the hell he’s doing but he beats me to it.

“We don’t need to unpack *right now*,” he says as he flicks through the movies. “Sit down and chill the fuck out.”

I sigh, taking one last look at the boxes before I sit beside him on the couch. Like he said, it’s not much stuff. We could just unpack it and have it over with…

Luca selects a cartoon about a house that flies through the air with a bunch of balloons, and I try not to roll my eyes too hard. But as the movie plays, my mind wanders.

LFA is in just three weeks. Which means only two weeks of intense training until I need to taper again. And in those two weeks I need to get more grappling in, get in the cage with Luca, work with Del, do more–

“TV is that way.” Luca nudges me, pointing to the screen.

I sigh, rubbing my eyes. “Maybe we should be watching fight videos of Mullen and Alvarez instead of movies about flying houses.”

Luca holds up a hand and scoffs. “First of all, the *house* doesn’t fly. The balloons carry it through the sky. Come on, Ty, seriously.” He shakes his head in disapproval. “And no. We’ve watched them all. We know everything there is to know about Murphy and Alcorn.”

Tension enters my body as I know he’s right, but I still feel like I need to be doing something. And rewatching some videos wouldn’t hurt.

Luca huffs out a laugh as he rolls his head to look at me. “You know what the main lesson is in this movie?”

I look at the TV screen as a talking dog gets distracted by a squirrel. “There’s a lesson?”

He nods. “That life is messy, and we can’t control it.” He holds my gaze for a moment before he smiles. “And actually… we’ve developed a new routine leading up to fights. One that actually helps you way more than overthinking and overworking your brain.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, my heart picking up its pace as I think I know where he’s going with this.

He lifts his hand and slides it under the waistband of my sweatpants. “Letting go, and turning it all off.”

His hand grasps my cock as he leans in and presses his lips to mine. My lips part, immediately taking him in as I grasp the side of his face. I’m hard for him in an instant, and as he slowly slides his hand up and down my length and glides his tongue along mine, I do exactly what he said, and just let go. I focus on the feeling of his hand on my cock, his body against mine, his soft lips and wet tongue… he feels so fucking good.

I moan against his lips as he increases his pace on me, and he nudges me to remove my shirt. And when I do, he immediately takes my nipple in his mouth and sucks.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan, my fingers sinking into his hair. He’s getting me close, and I’m not sure how much longer I’m going to last if he keeps this up.

As he rubs my precum down my cock, I tense and grip his hair tighter. “Fuck, I’m close.”

And he stops.

I release his hair so he can look up at me, and so I can glare at him.

But he just fucking smiles.

I’m so fucking close to coming, and I *need* to. I reach for my cock to finish this myself, but Luca grabs my wrist to stop me.

“Remember my challenge for you, Tiger? To give it all up to me, and let me take control?”

I look into his eyes, excitement rising within me as I think of what happened the last time he challenged me to completely let go. So I just nod.

He smiles. “Let me take even more.”

His hand pushes into my sweatpants again, and my head tips back as I moan at the intense feeling. The urge to come is quickly rising again with every stroke of my cock, and when his lips land on my neck, I can barely stand it.

I groan as I tip closer to the edge, the pressure in my pelvis building and the tingles starting to rise up my legs. But before they can go any further, Luca stops again.

I grunt with frustration as Luca stands up and smirks down at me. “Clothes off,” he says. “And don’t fucking touch.” He then turns, walking into the bedroom.

With another frustrated groan I push my sweatpants down, and try really fucking hard not to stroke myself, until Luca comes out of the bedroom with lube.

“Fuck,” he moans as he looks down at me, and grasps his cock through his sweatpants. “You’re so fucking hard.”

“I know,” I murmur, letting my eyes linger on the outline of his hard dick in his pants.

He pulls his shirt off, then sits beside me again on the couch. “You want to come, don’t you,” he says, bringing his lips to my jaw and licking up to my ear.

I take a breath in and nod, desperate to touch my dick and find some relief. I am *aching* and need him to get on with this.

He chuckles, pulling back to pour lube on his hand. And when he finally rubs it over my cock, a loud moan escapes me and I practically fucking collapse into Luca.

As he slowly jerks me and builds me up again, I pant and moan into Luca’s neck. I’m losing control of my body with every stroke of his hand, and this time, the pressure is building so rapidly and intensely, I think I’m literally going to explode.

“You close?” Luca asks in a low voice.

“Yes,” I pant. “Please. Please.” My hips jerk up into his hand as the overwhelming need to come takes over.

But Luca pushes my head back and removes his hand from my cock again.

“Fuck,” I grunt.

He kisses my neck and down my chest to my nipple, taking it in his mouth. A moan escapes me from deep within my chest as this new sensation now overrides the throbbing in my cock, and I’m happy for the distraction.

“Breathe,” Luca mutters against my chest.

I try to take a deep breath in, but as Luca slides to his knees on the floor between my legs, my heart rate spikes again.

Anticipation grows as I watch him pour more lube on his fingers, and he nudges my knees wider. And the second his finger presses against my hole, I'm fucking *desperate* for him.

"Do it," I pant, grabbing his arm and holding him in a bruising grip.

He chuckles, lowering his mouth to lick a bead of precum from the head of my cock, as he pushes a finger into my ass.

"Oh my god," I grunt. And before I can even process the feeling, Luca takes my cock into his mouth.

I can't even form words as I moan, groan and writhe on the couch in complete agony, which feels *so* fucking good. And when he pushes a second finger in, and fingers my ass as he sucks me, I can't fucking take it anymore.

"Fuck… fuck, fuck." I grab at Luca as the tingles once again start to rush up my legs in an intense need to come. "I need to come, please."

He releases my cock from his mouth and removes his fingers from my ass, looking up at me with a smirk. "I like it when you beg."

"Fuck you," I pant as I stare down at him. Every nerve in my body is on fucking fire right now, and I feel like I'm going to explode.

Luca just smiles as he pushes his sweatpants down over his hips, freeing his hard cock. I watch him with an intense craving as he rubs his lubed hand over his dick, and inches closer to me.

"Say it again, Tiger," he says as he presses the tip of his cock to my hole.

A wave of pleasure rolls through me as I take a sharp breath in, and a bead of precum drips from my dick onto my abs. I hold Luca's gaze for a moment as he waits, and continues to torture me.

But I fucking need it.

"Please," I say. "Please just fucking fuck me."

Luca pushes into my ass, and my release immediately starts to rise again. And this time, it's not a wave. It's a fucking tsunami making its way to shore, and there's no stopping it.

Luca fucks me hard, bringing his hand to my cock to stroke at the same time. The pressure within me builds even more, and I can't hold out any longer. I need it, and I need it now.

"I'm going to come," I grunt, grabbing at him and holding tight.

Luca just moans and continues to fuck and jerk me, finally letting me come. And I do. *Hard*.

The crash of pleasure over my body is the biggest release I've ever felt, as everything that was denied and built up is finally let go… and I've never felt anything like this. Every ounce of tension in my body lifts, and I'm left in a complete state of euphoria.

Luca pulls out of my ass and leans over me, giving his cock a few more pumps before he's coming on my stomach with a groan.

Then he grabs my hand, running my fingers through our cum before lifting them to my mouth. I take them, greedily tasting us both as I keep my eyes locked on his.

He's right. Life is messy, and we can't control it…

But we can fucking enjoy it.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT.

Oh my god.

It's happening. It's fucking happening.

I look down at Ty's arm around me, as he *big fucking spoons* me, and I try not to lose my shit.

I didn't even ask for it. I just woke up, and he's *holding* me.

I slowly and gently turn my head to look at him, so I don't wake him up. He looks so peaceful and content, with his arm draped over my body and his face buried in my shoulder. I can feel his soft, warm breath on my skin, and I never want this to end.

I need to edge him way more often if this is the result.

My eyes roam over his tousled dark hair and his face as I just smile. I fucking did it.

I trained a wild tiger.

Ty's eyes eventually open, and they meet mine.

"Morning, Tiger." I smile at him as he sleepily squints back at me, taking a moment to wake up.

But as he starts to roll onto his back, I grab his arm and keep him right where he is. He looks at me with confusion as he takes in my massive smile, then his gaze drops to my death grip on his arm as he cuddles me.

His eyes move back up to meet mine and he huffs out a breath. "You look happy."

"Beyond happy. My wildest dreams just came true." I roll into him, wrapping my arm around his torso and sighing into his chest.

Ty tenses for a moment, and I think he's about to push me off him. But he relaxes, and continues to hold me.

Pinch me.

As we lie here holding each other, I can't stop smiling. It's the most perfect cuddle I think I've ever had, and not only because I've had to work so fucking hard for it. But because it just feels so right… like this is exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Until Ty eventually rolls onto his back and looks at me. "I'm going to have to build up to doing more than that."

I chuckle. "Fine by me."

He tosses the covers back and gets out of bed, and I sit up too, watching him as he pulls on a pair of sweatpants.

"Ty."

He looks back at me as he grabs a t-shirt from the drawer.

"It's time," I say with a serious nod.

His brow furrows as he glances around the room, apparently not getting the seriousness of this situation. "For?"

I get out of bed and stand before him, then take the t-shirt out of his hand and toss it back in the drawer.

"You want to fuck again?" he asks, eyes widening. "I think I need a bit more time after–"

"No." I shake my head. "I mean, yeah I'd be down, but no. We have something much more important to do first."

I grab his wrist and pull it into the air above his head.

And he just looks back at me with a question in his eyes.

"You did it." I smile. "You climbed the final step."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Ty mutters as he rolls his eyes and tries to pull his wrist out of my grasp, but I don't let him.

"Remember when you told me you don't celebrate your small wins along the way because there's no point? That when you get to the end, you'll celebrate?"

Ty's eyes meet mine again, but he doesn't say anything.

"And remember when you told me you have no idea how to be in a relationship?"

He nods slightly, and I give him a soft smile.

"You won, Tiger," I say as I step closer to him. "You're at the top of those relationship stairs. Now fucking celebrate."

He huffs and shakes his head, but I grip his wrist tighter and force it higher above his head.

"I said fucking *celebrate*," I say, narrowing my eyes at him.

Ty cocks an eyebrow at me, and as he once again rolls his eyes, I think he's going to try to pull away again… but then I feel it.

I look up at his hand, as he forms it into a fist.

Fuck yeah. That's what I'm fucking talking about.

My heel lands on Ty's ribs as I complete a spinning back kick, and he grunts. I know he felt that, and I hop on my feet and I smile at him. Which he isn't too happy about.

Before he can step into me, I land two low kicks to his leg. But he quickly delivers one right back to me, forcing me to step back a bit and build my plan.

Because I'm a *thinker* now.

Kind of.

I come in with a high kick to his head so I can throw him off balance and force him to block, but I also know it's risky. He can choose to take advantage of my position and go for takedown if he's quick enough, and there's not much I can do to defend against it.

But he blocks it and chooses to stay standing.

"Good, Ty," Max calls from the side of the cage. "Don't rush it."

I scoff, tapping my gloves together as I smirk at Ty. Always planning, always thinking. This is our last hard spar before we taper our training for LFA, and he's deep in his head. But I get a little rush when I think about last night and how he lost all control…

Then Ty pulls a fucking switch kick on me which blows my fucking mind.

"What the fuck," I grunt as I block it at the last minute since I thought he was coming in with a left kick, when it was actually the right.

Well color me impressed…

I come in with a combo on him, getting a hit to his head and ribs, but as I move back and go for another kick, he grabs my foot and takes me down to the cage floor.

“Get the hip, Luca!” Max calls out, but I’m one step ahead of him.

Ty attempts to move into mount, but I hip escape and get my foot under me. Except then the fucker flips onto his back and immediately wraps his legs around my waist, putting us in closed guard as I’m up on one foot and one knee.

So I punch him.

I get him on the chin, but he blocks the rest of my hits as he pulls one of his knees up to his chest to protect his body. And as I elbow the back of his leg, I get a view of his ass, which is nice.

No. Fucking *focus.* I can get back up in there later.

Ty pushes against me to spin on his back so his head is now at my knee, and he gets a body shot to my ribs as I attempt a hold on his legs. But this is a terrible place for me to be, because as his legs wrap around my neck, my ribs are left wide open for him and I can’t move. I can’t get any hits on him either, as his arms are blocking his body, and I’m distracted because his dick is in my face *and* mine is in his.

And while my brain is busy imagining just what we could do later, he pulls some crazy fucking move where he pushes against the cage wall with his feet and rolls his body to push me backwards. As I land on my ass, he rushes me… and pulls me into an armbar.

Always the armbars with this asshole.

I tap him with a grunt and push to my feet, fixing my headband since he fucked it up by holding my head with his sexy thighs.

“Luca,” Max sighs and hangs his fingers on the cage, peering through at me. “Where is your head?”

I sigh as well and point an accusing finger at Ty. “Look, first it was his ass in my face, and then his dick, and if you knew what we did last night you would understand why it’s been so difficult to stay focused.”

Ty sighs and turns away from Max, who just presses his lips together as he glances between us.

“Ok…” Max says slowly, “well, this is your last spar before LFA, so–”

“Get my head out of Ty’s ass, got it.” I nod, tapping my gloves together and turning to Ty. “Let’s do this.”

He blows out a breath and meets me in the middle of the cage. I hold out my glove, and his eyes meet mine as he taps it with his.

I smile, moving into my stance and getting in the zone. “LFA, here we come.”

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THIRTY-NINE

I GRAB my water bottle and take a drink, both relieved and on edge about finishing my last workout before LFA. As usual, this last week leading up to the fight has been difficult since I crave the hard workouts to keep the restless energy out. But each time it's getting easier to manage, and this time… it hasn't been that bad.

"I'm going to sleep so hard on the plane tomorrow," Elijah says as he drops down onto the mats in the gym, also finished with his run.

Seb is already sprawled out next to Adão on the mats and lifts his head to look around at us all. "Whose bright idea was it to book a flight at 5:30 AM anyway?"

"Mine." Max exits his office and crosses his arms, looking down at Seb. "So you can have the entire day in the hotel to comfortably cut any remaining weight before weigh-in tomorrow night. Got a problem with that?"

Seb quickly shakes his head. "No. Nope. Not at all."

"Didn't think so," Max says, a small smirk peeking through.

"So, anyone need a ride to the airport in the morning?" Luca asks, also dropping down to sit on the mats, and pulling me with him. "Because Ty will be bright-eyed and bushy-bearded that early in the morning, so he'll drive."

I shoot him a look, and he just shrugs. "Tell me that's not true."

Rosa chuckles as her and Noah join us on the mats. "Bushy-bearded?"

"Just… don't even bother," I mutter.

"Rosa, we can grab you since you're close to us," Luca says to her.

Her eyes widen slightly, and she glances at Noah. “Oh, that’s alright. I’m already riding with Noah.”

Luca’s eyes slide to Noah. “Really?” He smiles, glancing between him and Rosa. “You live on opposite ends of the city. That’s pretty damn early to make such a long drive, in the opposite direction of the airport… unless it won’t be a long drive and all you have to do is roll over in–”

“So, UFC officials, already eyeing you two,” Rosa cuts him off, leaning back on her hands and smiling between me and Luca. “That’s fucking awesome.”

I chuckle at her abrupt change in conversation and Luca excitedly sits forward, forgetting all about his effort to figure out Rosa’s airport travel plans.

“Oh my god, right?” He shakes his head and blows out a breath. He then looks at me. “You better fucking win, so I don’t have to leave your sorry ass behind.”

I roll my eyes and let out a breath of laughter. “Cocky asshole.”

He lifts an eyebrow and drops his eyes to my dick. “It isn’t right now, but it could be.”

“Oh my god,” Elijah mutters, and Max runs a hand over his face.

And I just close my eyes and sigh.

“So, anyway…” Rosa chuckles. “Since everyone is here… what do you all say about a little cooldown stretch session?”

A chorus of groans and no’s sound from everyone around the mats, and Rosa just rolls her eyes.

“Fucking babies,” she murmurs.

“Alright,” Max says with a laugh as he turns back to his office. “If there’s no yoga happening, everyone go home. Go to bed.”

Adão hops to his feet quickly. “Yup, sounds great. I don’t need a torn hamstring two days before a fight, just because Rosa says I should be able to touch my toes.”

Noah laughs as we all get to our feet. “I actually got pretty close…”

Elijah glances at him over his shoulder as he makes his way to the locker room. “Please. You’re supposed to be on our side.”

I chuckle as I start to follow everyone to the locker room. But when I notice Luca isn’t coming, I look behind me to see him standing by the bench, looking down at his phone.

“What?” I ask.

Luca looks up at me from his phone, as everyone disappears into the locker room. He flips it around to show me the screen, and I step closer so I can see it. It shows a missed call, and a voicemail.

"It's my parents," he says.

I take another step towards him, tension immediately entering my body. "When did they call?"

"About an hour ago." He looks back down at the screen, but he doesn't do anything as he just continues to stare at it.

Worry settles in me as I watch him, as whatever they said in that voicemail could set him back. They could have called to berate him for what he said to them, and what I said to them, or to continue putting pressure on him to do what they want him to. And with just two days until a fight that could change our lives forever… I'm worried about how this will affect him.

"Are you going to listen?" I ask.

He looks up at me again, thoughtfully. "I almost feel like it would be worse not to."

I nod in understanding. I get it. Luca and I have both attempted to ignore and shove aside the things that were holding us back, and it never got us anywhere. So that's not what we do anymore. Now, we face the fear straight on, and fight it.

Luca taps his screen and brings the phone to his ear.

I watch him as I faintly hear Clara's voice through the speaker in the quiet gym. Luca's face remains neutral as he keeps his eyes on the mats before him, and just listens. And when it's over, he takes the phone from his ear and blows out a breath.

Then he chuckles.

"What…" I ask hesitantly, not sure if that's an amused, relieved or angry chuckle.

His eyes meet mine, and he smiles. "They get it. She said they heard me, and they understand. She apologized for not taking the time to see what was truly important to me, and they recognize that the choice I've made is the right one. And they are happy for me."

"Really?" I ask, a bit surprised by that.

Luca nods. "Yeah. And…" He pauses for a moment, taking in a breath. "She said they love me and know they've been showing support in the wrong way, and that they need to back off and let me make my own

decisions.” He chuckles again. “She actually said they need to learn to let go of their need to control.”

I let out a breath of laughter. “You don’t say.”

Luca laughs. “No wonder I’m so good at dealing with your bullshit.”

“Fuck off,” I say with a smirk.

He tilts his head and smiles innocently. “Only if you join me.”

I shake my head with a light laugh and Luca continues to smile at me.

He then sighs. “She didn’t say anything about MMA. But that’s ok. This was a major step in the right direction, and the rest of it… well…” he gives me a sly look, “one step at a time.”

I groan. “More fucking stairs, great.”

Luca laughs. “Oh, you fucking liked it. And this is for them, not you, so chill.” He grabs his water from the bench and starts towards the locker room. “She asked me to call them back, so let’s go. I’ll call them at home.”

But I don’t move.

Because there’s something I haven’t let myself think of in a while. And it’s time I do.

He looks over his shoulder at me, then stops. “What?”

I stay quiet for a moment as I let my thoughts organize. “Seeing you deal with your family… it’s making me think about mine.”

Luca steps towards me, brows drawn together and concern in his eyes.

“Well,” I shrug, “my brother.”

He nods. “Ok. Well, do you want to go visit him when we get back from Vegas? Or–”

“Fuck no,” I say immediately, shaking my head. “I never want to see him again. He hasn’t even called me in months, since I ignored his last request for money.”

Luca nods again. “So, what are you thinking then?”

“That I officially need to cut that tie,” I say. “Watching you stand up for yourself to your family made me realize I never did that with mine. I ran away. My mom is gone, and I know I’ll never hear from her again, but my brother… he still has access to me, and I don’t want him to. I had this idea growing up that he was my idol because he kept me out of foster care, but he was the worst possible influence on me. He ruined his life with drugs, and he almost ruined mine too. I made poor decisions, because it’s what he taught me. But I still made it here. Without him.”

Luca smiles softly as he looks into my eyes, and just waits and listens.

“I’m going to call the prison, and remove myself from his list of approved calls so he won’t be able to contact me anymore,” I say, and immediately feel a weight lifting from me. “And I don’t owe him an explanation.”

Luca’s eyebrows lift slightly. “If that’s what you want, then you should.”

I nod. “When families suck, you just have to find your own.”

A smile spreads across Luca’s face. It’s what he said to me the last time we spoke about my brother, and I think about it often. Because I did find my own.

I step closer to him. “I’m glad you’re my family.”

His hand lifts to the side of my face, and he presses his lips to mine in a soft kiss.

“Moon and stars, Tiger.”

“Moon and stars, Mitchell.”

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FORTY

THE VEGAS SKY is full of stars, and the bright moon illuminates the bare desert around us.

And Luca won't shut the fuck up about it.

Apparently it's a Waning Gibbous moon and he's obsessing over the fact that it symbolizes a time for gratitude and looking inwards to reevaluate goals. I get it, it's the perfect night for it. We just had our weigh-in and made weight, and LFA is tomorrow night. I'm beyond grateful for where I am right now, and if we win this fight, it could mean so much for our future.

But he's been talking about this fucking moon for almost twenty minutes now.

"*And*," Luca says, taking the last bite of his meal as we sit on the hood of the car we rented, "during this phase of the moon, you can expect personal growth since you become so self-aware." He looks at me as I lie back on the hood. "I may have to take a look back and see how your growth has coincided with the moon phases. That would be a cool experiment."

I run a hand over my face with a sigh. "Do whatever you need to do, but please just shut the fuck up."

He chuckles as he lies back on the hood beside me. "Would you rather be looking at the moon and listening to me, or watching *Mulan*?"

I turn my head to look at him. "Trick question. I know we're doing both."

He smiles widely. "See? Growth."

With a sigh, I turn back to the starry sky. My eyes roam over the dense clusters of stars, and it's crazy to think that we're just a short distance outside the city. The desert is empty and quiet, and it's the perfect place to take a moment and prepare for everything that is going to happen tomorrow, in the biggest fight of our lives so far.

We're both quiet as we look up at the sky, and my eyes slowly trace over the moon and the stars.

"It's all so big, isn't it?" Luca asks quietly.

And I know he's not talking about the sky.

I nod, keeping my eyes up. "Yeah." My mind travels back to the weigh-in this evening, and how busy and *huge* it was. There were cameras everywhere, reporters wanting to interview us, and everything felt so official and important.

"I can't believe we're here," Luca says as he turns his head to look at me. "We actually did it."

I roll my head towards him, meeting his eyes. "We did."

He smiles softly. "Next up, UFC…"

A smile makes its way onto my lips as well as I stare back at him, and the moonlight highlights his eyes so I can see the excitement in them.

And I feel it in me too. Making it to the UFC has been my goal ever since I became serious about MMA. I was desperate to escape a life I didn't want, and MMA gave me everything I was looking for. I threw myself into training, and it was all that mattered. Nothing was going to distract me from achieving my dream.

Until this fucker came along.

He challenged me, distracted me, pissed me off and made me question everything about myself. But he also made me a better fighter and taught me how to live, and love.

Now, I'm taking the final step to reach my goal. And I can't imagine doing it without him.

"How are we going to celebrate our wins, Tiger?" he asks with a sparkle in his eye.

"I'm sure you have ideas," I say, bracing myself for whatever those will be.

Luca chuckles, turning back to the sky. "I mean, we're in Vegas," he says. "So, drinking, fucking, gambling, catch a little Cirque du Soleil…" He turns his head to me again. "But we're not getting married."

I look at him, confused. “I didn’t think we were.”

“Ok, good.” Luca sighs in relief. “I don’t think either of us are the marriage type, but if we were, I would probably need a well thought-out and planned proposal.” He then smiles widely. “Which sounds right up your alley.”

I shake my head. “Not happening.”

Luca laughs. “Didn’t think so.”

We’re quiet for a moment as we look up at the sky, until Luca breaks the silence.

“Tigers love water.”

I think on that for a moment, trying to link it back to anything he just said, and come up blank.

“Ok…” I say, waiting for him to get on with it.

He nods seriously. “They love to swim. And they have webbed paws.” He grabs my hands and spreads my fingers, inspecting them. “There’s an epic looking pool at our hotel, and if we can find you a pair of tiger shorts and you go down the waterslide wearing those, I will fuck you so hard you won’t be able to walk for a week.” He nods again. “Now *that’s* a celebration.”

I pull my hand from his and shake my head. “I’m not wearing tiger shorts.”

Luca gives me a knowing look. “I believe you said something similar about tiger boxers…”

As I look back at him, I can’t help but chuckle. As ridiculous as he is… he’s *my* ridiculous.

“I love you,” I say as I look into his eyes.

He smiles softly back at me. “I love you, too.”

I wrap an arm around him, pulling him into me as he rests his head on my shoulder, and we look up at the moon and stars.

And it feels good.

“Morning!” Rosa greets Luca and I from her seat at the table as we enter the buffet area in the hotel.

“Oh my god,” Luca looks around the room at the tables of food lining the walls. “I’m fucking starving.”

“It’s really good too,” Seb says as he slides into his chair next to Rosa with a full plate of food and takes a bite of bacon.

Luca points at it. “I want that. I need that.” He turns and wanders away towards the food, muttering something about muffins and toast.

Rosa takes a sip of her coffee and smiles at me. “Have a good night?”

I nod. “After *Mulan* was over, yes.”

She laughs and I point at her coffee. “And I need that.”

She gestures to a table behind me with the coffee and I nod to her in thanks, turning to get a cup. A very large cup.

Just as I pick up a mug, I hear a familiar voice behind me.

“Oh my god, Ty?”

As I turn around, I come face to face with two of my old gym mates from back home, Shawn and Dylan.

“Hey, man!” Shawn smiles and steps forward, pulling me into a hug. “So happy to see you here! Is this your hotel too?” He releases me from his hug, and I don’t even know what to say as Dylan hugs me as well.

“Hey,” I say eventually. “Yeah, it is… What are you guys doing here?”

“We’re here for a bachelor party,” Dylan says with a smile. “But we’re ditching the party tonight to come to watch the fights. We couldn’t believe it when we saw your name on the card.”

“I wanted to text you, but we didn’t even know we were coming until about a week ago,” Shawn says. “And I could only imagine what the week was like leading up to this, so I didn’t want to interrupt your preparation. Figured we could meet up after. We’d love to hear everything you’ve been–”

“Ty, they have cinnamon rolls, but because I didn’t make them, you’re not allowed to have them.” Luca appears beside me, looking down at his plate and poking at the cinnamon roll. “Also, the cinnamon to dough ratio is *way* off.” He looks up, and glances between me, Dylan and Shawn, then his face breaks out in an excited smile. “Oh hey! Ty’s old gym buddies! What’s up, guys?”

“Hey, Luca,” Dylan chuckles. Then he curiously glances between us. “We heard you were both accepted onto the team in St. Louis. Happy to see

you could finally become friends."

Luca turns to face me with a *massive* smile.

I roll my eyes at him, but bite back a smile of my own. "Actually, we're… more than friends."

Dylan and Shawn are quiet for a moment as their eyes flick between me and Luca.

"You mean, like…" Shawn trails off, clearly not sure if he's understanding this right.

"Fucking." Luca nods, then takes a bite of his cinnamon roll. But immediately sets it back on his plate with a look of disgust. "Damn, that's nasty. And we're also in love now too."

Their eyes widen and immediately slide to me, like they're waiting for me to punch him or tell them he's joking.

I nod. "It's true."

Dylan laughs. "Holy shit! Never saw that coming. How the fuck did that happen?"

I sigh and look at Luca, while he just smiles back at me. "Long fucking story."

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FORTY-ONE

LUCA

MY EYES ROAM over the Legacy Fighting Alliance logos along the base of the octagon, as Ty and I stand before it in the huge, empty arena. The spotlights are all focused on the center of this massive space, illuminating the cage we'll be fighting in in just a couple hours. The anticipation continues to build with every silent moment we stand here… but it feels good.

Because when I step foot in that cage, it's *mine.* It will be *my* time, and I'll be leaving that cage a winner. And so will my Tiger.

I hear the happy chatter of our teammates behind us as they make their way to our dressing rooms, but Ty and I stay where we are. We continue to stare up at the cage, just taking this all in. We worked fucking hard to get here, and we're going to make the most of every moment.

After a few more minutes, Ty gently slides his hand into mine and squeezes it.

I turn my head to him, and he softly smiles before turning to look at me as well.

"Looks like a good place to fuck up some d-holes."

I chuckle with a nod. "It does."

"Oh my god, this is insane."

We both turn to look behind us to see Mia and Nadia walking down the aisle towards us. They each have a look of awe on their face as they look around the arena and take in just how fucking big this place is.

I smile as Nadia rushes forward and I pull her into a big hug.

“Hey, guys,” Mia says with a smile as she hugs Ty, and he awkwardly hugs her back.

And as Mia wraps her arms around me next, I hang onto her just a bit longer. It means the world to me that they are here to support us, and I am so happy I get to see them before the fight.

Mia releases me with a smile and looks around the arena again. “It’s so big… How are you guys feeling?”

As I look at Ty, I can see in his eyes that he feels the same way I do.

“Good.” I nod. “It’s… maybe a bit overwhelming, but in a good way.” I take a deep breath in and blow it out. “We’re ready.”

“Never doubted it.” Mia winks at me. Then she glances between me and Ty. “So, who’s first?”

“Luca,” Ty says. “He’s the fourth fight, I’m the sixth.”

Nadia nods. “That’s good you get to go early. More time to celebrate afterwards.”

I hold up a hand for her to high-five which she does with a laugh. “That’s what I’m fucking talking about,” I say, feeling an immense amount of pride for my little sister.

Mia chuckles. “And what do you do now, until fight time?”

“We’ll head back to the dressing room and chill for a bit, until we need to warm up and hype up,” I say as I shadow box the air and feint a punch on Nadia, and she swats it away with a roll of her eyes. “I got a sick playlist ready to go for warm up.”

Ty sighs. “Great,” he mutters.

I shoot him a look. “Oh, fuck off. ‘Party in the U.S.A.’ is an amazing fucking hype song, and you know it.”

Nadia and Mia laugh, and I just shake my head as I turn my attention back to them. “I have to teach him everything.”

“We’ll let you get back to the teaching then,” Mia says with another chuckle, but then hesitates, giving me a cautious look.

“What?” I ask.

She lets out a small sigh. “I just… I know how important this is to you, so I want to know you’re ok… because…” she trails off, and I smile at her.

“Because Mom and Dad aren’t here and haven’t said a thing to me about it?” I ask, and Mia nods sadly. But I just keep smiling. “It’s fine, Mia. I knew I wouldn’t hear from them about this. I actually consider the silence a huge win. This is the most supportive they’ve been about MMA so far.” I

shrug. “Maybe they’ll come around to it at some point, but I’m fine if they don’t.”

Nadia smiles and Mia reaches out to squeeze my hand.

“Well, we’re happy we can be here,” Mia says. “And I’m so glad we were able to see you before the fight. I can’t wait to watch you both kick ass.”

Nadia looks between me and Ty and gestures to the cage with a sly smile. “Don’t get too fucked up in there.”

Ty chuckles lightly and smiles at her. “Only the other guy.”

“That’s the spirit,” she says with a chuckle as she nudges him with her elbow.

Mia pulls me into another hug, holding tight. “Good luck,” she says, then releases me and moves to Ty, wrapping her arms around him as well. “Love you both, and we’ll see you after.”

Ty’s eyes widen slightly and slide to me, but I just smile at him. He finally gets to experience love from family. And it’s both heartwarming and hilariously awkward at the same time.

Once Mia and Nadia have left, Ty and I head back to the dressing rooms to begin our pre-fight routines. Ty goes into broody, focused mode, sitting in the corner with his hood up, all alone with his thoughts, while I get my headphones on and blast some tunes to get myself hyped up. Everyone is in the zone, doing what they need to do to stay focused and bring their best damn fight into that cage tonight. And I have no doubt that every one of us is going to do just that. Fairburn MMA is the best fucking fight team here.

And as my time creeps closer and I finish my warm-up, I take a moment to listen to the distant cheers from the crowd outside the room as they watch the fight before mine. Each wave of cheers sends a ripple of excitement and anticipation through me, and I let the adrenaline build, ready to let it all out in the cage.

I rub my hands together and let out a breath, turning to meet Ty’s eyes as he watches me from under his hood.

I hold his gaze for a moment, until his eyes slowly fall down my body, landing on my feet.

“I don’t want to take them off,” I say.

He cocks an eyebrow at me. “You have to.”

“I know.” I sigh and reach down to my feet, pulling my magical unicorn socks off. I toss them aside with another sigh, then turn back to Ty. “Ok,

gimmie a peek."

"Why?" he asks.

I tilt my head and give him a look. "We've been through this. Just fucking show me."

He shakes his head with a sigh, pulling his hoodie up and his shorts down, just enough to show me the waistband of his tiger boxers. And my heart does a little flutter.

"Perfection," I breathe out.

"Luca."

I turn around to see Max at the door.

"Gloves on, almost time," he says.

I nod, blowing out a breath as I grab my gloves. As I slide them on, I once again take in the sounds of the crowd outside and hop on my feet as I psych myself up.

I can do this. I fucking *got* this.

"Alright," Max says as he steps before me and looks into my eyes. "You know exactly what to do. Stay focused and remember to plan your attack. Watch his defense and come in strong, fast and committed." He grasps my shoulder and smiles. "And fight like you always do. Be ruthless."

I nod and tap my gloves together. "Got it."

"You got this, Luca!" Rosa yells from the other side of the room.

Seb claps his hands and whoops. "You're going to kill it, bro!"

I hop on my feet again and shake my arms out as everyone cheers and calls out their encouragement. The urge to fight is overwhelming, and I'm fucking ready… but there's one more thing I need.

I turn around, expecting to find Ty in the corner, but I come face to face with him instead as he stands before me.

His dark eyes stare into mine as energy flows through my body and my heart thunders. But as I hold his gaze, I stay completely still and take in this moment with him. Everything could change for us tonight… and I can't wait to take this next step with him.

He slides his hand onto my ribs over the moon and stars tattoo, as my name is announced and the crowd cheers. But I don't move.

As his lips meet mine, I lift my hands to hold him against me and take everything I can.

And when he pulls back, he gives me a soft smile. "Let's get 'em."

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EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

I HEAD to my corner of the cage as the first round ends, tired and breathless, but ready for more. Max enters the cage as I lean back against the post, and the cutman applies a coagulant to my cut lip.

"You got him," Max says as he stands before me. "I know you're tired, but he's exhausted. Keep coming in with a strong offense and continue to wear him down. He's going to want to save his energy and stay upright in round two for as long as he can, so take him down to the floor early."

I nod, blowing out a breath as the cutman applies more Vaseline to my face. My opponent, Andre Veiga, is a tough fucking fighter, and a strong offensive striker. But he's been on his defense for the entire first round, as I forced him to take a steady stream of hits on the ground. And I plan to keep it that way and end this in the second round.

"He's going to come in with a strong attack right away so he can take control," Max says, keeping my focus on him. "So do what you do best, and don't let him." He glances over his shoulder as the ref tells us that the second round is about to begin. He looks back at me and smiles, squeezing my shoulder. "Take it home."

I nod again, and as he leaves the cage with everyone else, I sweep my eyes over the sight before me, allowing myself to take it all in for a moment. The sounds of the loud and excited crowd fill the space, and the bright lights and cameras are all pointing towards the middle of the cage. I look down at the floor and let my gaze linger for a moment on the UFC logo, taking another moment to remind myself exactly where I am, and appreciate every step along the way that got me here.

The cage door closes, and it's just me, Veiga, and the ref in here once again. I hop on my feet and shake out my arms, ready to block it all out again and focus on the fight. But before I do, I drop my gaze to the side of the cage.

Luca is sitting with Max, watching me with a sly smile. His cheekbone is cut and bruised from his fight just before mine, which he won with a knockout, and he looks happy and refreshed. His smile grows as he points to the sky, and I nod back at him, bringing my hand down to pat my thigh over the baby blue moon and stars on my fight shorts.

The ref approaches the middle of the cage and points to me and Veiga. "Ready?"

I nod, and Veiga does as well.

"Begin."

We both step forward, and tap gloves, then Veiga immediately comes in with a straight right. But I expected that, so I manage the distance between us so it doesn't land. He closes the distance again with a front kick followed by a cross, doing exactly what Max said he would. He's coming in with a strong attack right off the bat so he can take early control of this round. But that's not happening.

I take the kick and block the cross, then drop down low in my stance and rush forward, wrapping my arms around his legs for a double leg takedown. But he must have also figured out my approach, because he defends against this by sprawling as he leans forward and spreading his legs out behind him so he doesn't land on his back.

And that's fine by me.

The cheers from the crowd are loud, but I don't let them in, and I don't let it break my focus. Veiga is going to try to take my back, since I was forced to drop to my knees and that's the last place I want him. So I quickly roll onto my back and wrap my legs around his waist to put us in closed guard.

He attempts to lean back, but I hold him tight to keep him here. I can tell he's struggling because of how tired he is, so this is exactly where we need to be. He lands a few punches to my ribs, but they're weak and I'm easily able to block them and force him to make the next move. Because this is ending right now.

Veiga brings his weight forward over my hips as he directs his hits to my head, and I lift an arm to block him. And as I elbow him in the head,

and he momentarily lowers the arm on his other side to protect himself, I lift my leg over his shoulder.

The cheers from the crowd grow as I hook my other foot under that leg and pull him into a triangle choke, keeping his left arm pinned to my chest. I squeeze my legs tight around his neck and shoulder and lock him in.

But Veiga does exactly what he's supposed to do to counter this position, and pushes onto his feet to get them under him. But I hang on, because I have a plan, and I knew this would happen. He steps under and falls onto his back as he brings his leg over my torso, so he can slip his head backwards out of my grip on him. But I still have a hold of his left arm. And as I hold it tight and pull, he taps.

I win with an armbar.

The ref falls to his knees before us to end the fight, and I release Veiga. I push to my feet and take a deep breath, closing my eyes and letting the roar of the crowd enter my space once again. I hear the cage door open as cameras and team members enter, and I feel hands patting my back and congratulations being yelled at me from all directions.

But when I feel him before me, I open my eyes.

"You and your fucking armbars," Luca says with a smirk.

I huff out a laugh. "They work. Beat you with them enough over the years."

He chuckles lightly. "Maybe it's time to try something new?"

"Why?" I ask. "Tired of me one-upping you?"

His eyes narrow as tension enters his shoulders. "You may hold the record between us for wins by submission, but *I* hold the record for knockouts."

My chin lifts as I stare back at him, a familiar urge rising. The one that tells me to put him in his fucking place. "And who *still* has one more win overall?"

His eyes flash, but I bite back a smile. Even as our love continues to grow, the rivalry will never end.

"Fuck you," he says.

And I just shrug one shoulder. "If you insist."

A smile slowly grows on Luca's lips, and he lets out a small chuckle. "This is not the place to get me all hot and bothered, Tiger."

I look into his eyes as everyone bustles around us in the cage, and cameras get set up so the ref can announce me as the winner. But I continue

to block it all out. Because as I look into Luca's eyes and we stand over the UFC logo in this cage that we've dreamed of fighting in for so long… this is all that matters right now.

We fought fucking hard to get here. We fought each other, and we fought together. And this moment right here, with him, is everything I could have ever asked for.

I smile as my eyes roam over the injuries on his face and a feeling of immense pride takes over. I'm proud of him, I'm proud of me, and I'm proud of us.

"Then we should probably get this over with and get out of here. Because it's time to celebrate, Mitchell. Harder than we ever have before."

As he steps forward and brings his lips to mine, I wrap my arms around him and hold him against me. The cameras may be waiting, but I don't care.

We fucking made it.

Every single one of my dreams have come true.

With Luca fucking Mitchell.

THE END

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THANK YOU

Thank you to each and every one of you for reading and showing these snarky boys some love!

I absolutely loved writing this duet. Venturing into rivals to lovers was so fun, and setting it in the world of MMA was just perfect. Because let's face it. We all have those thoughts when watching these fighters roll around with each other…

And I'm sorry if you'll never look at cinnamon rolls the same again. I know I won't.

I want to send a huge thank you to all of my Alpha, Beta and ARC readers! Your love for these boys is amazing, and I can't thank you enough for your wonderful support!

Some special shoutouts:

Melissa – I say this to you at least once a week, but I would be lost without you! Thank you for holding my hand through this crazy journey and gently nudging me towards all the things I need to do haha. You've become such a great friend over this past year and I'm so lucky to have met you!

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for being a part of this journey so far, and standing by me. You are so appreciated xo

Cait – Apparently we're the same person, just on opposite sides of the world? Someone who understands the complexities of owning an orange cat, *and* horses? You're stuck with me now. The cat memes and photos of floof make my day, and I'm so thankful we've met! I'm looking forward to working with you on future projects!

Moon and stars to all of you!

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GLOSSARY

Striker – a fighter that is highly skilled in a standing and striking fight, often challenged when the fight is on the ground. Popular striking arts in MMA are boxing, Muay Thai, Karate, and Taekwondo

Grappler – a fighter who is highly skilled in ground control and grappling, and typically is challenged in a standing and striking fight. Popular grappling arts in MMA include wrestling, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and Judo

Complete fighter – a fighter who is well-versed and equally strong in all styles the sport of MMA is comprised of

Sparring – a form of training, and a simulation of a real fight without heavy blows

Rolling – sparring or drilling in grappling or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

Guard pass – getting past an opponent's guard position in grappling, and establishing a more dominant position

Sweep – a move to reverse a grappling position

Takedown – a move to off-balance an opponent, bringing them to the ground with the attacker landing on top

Feint – a move where a fighter fakes an attack or motion in order to deceive an opponent

Grappling positions:

Closed guard – a fighter holds an opponent by interlocking feet behind their back

Butterfly guard – the bottom fighter's feet are positioned on the inside of the top fighter's thighs to restrict their movement

Side control – a fighter restricts their opponent by lying across them perpendicularly

Mount position – a fighter is on top of their opponent with their legs wrapped around their body

High mount – a fighter is sitting on top of their opponent, over the sternum, with knees forcing opponent's arms away from their midsection

Single X position – an open guard where one fighter is on their back and isolates one of the top fighter's hips to open up attack opportunities on the legs

Open guard – the bottom fighter's back is on the ground and legs are open, not wrapped around the top fighter's waist, and fighters have contact either through arms or legs

Back control – a fighter uses their feet and legs to restrict and control the movements of their opponent from the back. Commonly used to prevent escape, and to defend, sweep or attack. Also called hooks in

Submissions:

A fighter "taps out" or concedes to an opponent to end a match

Armbar – a fighter traps the opponent's arm, exerting pressure on the elbow joint in attempt to hyperextend the opponent's elbow

Kimura – a double joint armlock of the shoulder and elbow joints, placing pressure on the opponent's shoulder

Rear naked choke – a fighter uses their arms to choke their opponent from behind

Triangle choke – a fighter uses their legs to encircle their opponent's neck and one arm

Guillotine choke – a fighter faces their opponent, encircling their neck with their arms and hands clasped to restrain them

Strikes:

Hits, kicks and punches

Switch kick – a quick change in stance by bringing the lead leg to the rear for an effective and powerful body kick

Spinning back kick – a fighter steps forward, spins their body backwards, kicking at their opponent behind them

Front kick – a kick, or jab with the foot, in front of the fighter's body

Left hook kick – sometimes called a roundhouse kick. A fighter lifts and moves their whole leg around their body before landing on their opponent

Crescent kick – a kick that travels in an arc, striking the opponent with the outside edge of the foot

Straight punch – a powerful punch thrown with the rear/dominant hand. Also called a cross, or throwing a hand

Jab – a fast punch in short range, often used defensively to keep an opponent from getting too close

Uppercut – a punch that begins low and travels upwards, typically aiming for the chin or upper abdomen/ribs of an opponent

Hook – a powerful punch performed by rotating the body and swinging the arm at a 90 degree angle into an opponent

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ALSO BY EVE HOLMES

No Holds Barred

Book 1: Hooks In

Songs of Freedom

An MM Rockstar Romance trilogy

Book 1: Silhouette

Book 2: Details

Book 3: Remastered

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eve is an avid lover of coffee, getting lost in fictional worlds, crafting and ducks. She lives in a small town in Atlantic Canada with a bunch of animals and plans to get many more, much to her family and friends dismay.

When she's not trying to get ducks to love her, she can usually be found fantasizing about living in a treehouse, riding her horses, drawing and attending bookclub, which is basically just engaging in bookish shenanigans with her friends.

Eve enjoys a challenge, and will gladly turn the strangest writing prompt into a book. There's much more to come, we're just getting started!

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